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DONA CELESTIS

By the same Author

THE WAY OF AN EAGLE

THE KNAVE OF DIAMONDS

THE ROCKS OF VALPRÉ

THE SWINDLER AND OTHER STORIES

THE KEEPER OF THE DOOR

THE SAFETY CURTAIN AND OTHER STORIES

GREATHEART

BY REQUEST

THE LIVE BAIT AND OTHER STORIES

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AL-04 DONA CELESTIS

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by

ETHEL M. DELL



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PROLOGUE

CHARLES PEREGRINE was dying—not by inches, as he himself expressed it, but by leaps and bounds. And the curious part of it all was that he did not mind. This circumstance was to him most extraordinary. Life had been a matter of such enormous importance. He had always regarded death as a kind of abstract horror, as a far-off terrible precipice down which he must some day plunge into depths of darkness. But now that he had drawn near to it, both horror and precipice were gone, and he marvelled that he could ever have been so foolish. Like a child he had created his own particular ogre, and behold, as he braced himself to face it, it vanished into thin air! True, there was something beyond that he could not yet see, but it was not in any sense alarming. His spirit was interested and unafraid. His body was too tired to shrink. He remembered how long years ago he had watched by his mother's bed when death had come to her, and turning the pages of a book that was always beside her at night in a vague search for comfort had found the words:

*“To me the thought of Death is terrible,
Having such hold on Life.
To thee it is not so much as even
The lifting of a latch; only a step
Into the open air, out of a tent
Already luminous with light that shines
Through its transparent walls—
O pure in heart!”*

He had never forgotten those words; they had appealed to him in a fashion that made scepticism seem outrageous. It was instinct rather than faith. People might scoff—always had scoffed—at faith. But not at instinct! That was ingrained, inborn; beyond reason, but also beyond contradiction. Not so much as even the lifting of a latch! Only a step into the open air! How strangely true it had seemed to him in that far-off day of grief! And how tenaciously he had clung to the thought ever since! He had never

thought of her as dead—only away—somewhere away in the open air and the light that had shone through the transparent walls of her tent. The idea had held him almost like a revelation. He had adored his mother, and her passing had left such a blank as even now he could scarcely bear to look back upon. No other love had entered his life while she had been there. They had been as one soul and one mind.

Afterwards—afterwards in the toil and stress of mortal existence, he had perforce descended from that high pinnacle to which they two had climbed together. Other things—worldly things—had as it were caught about his feet and dragged him downwards. Life had changed. He had found himself on a lower plane and, despising it, he yet was compelled to breathe its atmosphere. Gradually like a slow-gorging monster—it had assimilated him. He found—rather to his surprise—that he had got to live, though for a while he often wondered why. And as the sacred memory of the one perfect friendship of his soul receded imperceptibly into the past he discovered that even this lower, almost despicable existence had its attractions. People were decent to him. They encouraged him in his work. They told him he would make his name. Well, he had made it. He had visited almost every court in Europe, and he had been treated like a prince himself.

The silly incident of his marriage had assumed its proper proportions now, but it had once been an affair of almost colossal tragedy. She had certainly possessed beauty—of a fleeting, flower-like type. He might have known that she would never stick to him, but like a fool he had endowed every woman in his own mind with the loyal simplicity that had made his mother so saint-like a being. And she had let him down—of course she had let him down! How ridiculous he had been over the wretched, sordid affair—how outraged—how embittered! And after all she had but gone her appointed way. Loyalty was not in her. How had he ever really expected it? Marriage to her had been an interlude—no more. To him it had now become the one superb foolishness of his life! If he had not been living with his head in the clouds, such an act of madness would never have occurred to him. Why marry? Why fetter oneself with shackles from which it cost so much in humiliation and degradation as well as worldly goods to break free when everything that matrimony could provide, without its many handicaps, could be had practically for the asking?

Family cares made no appeal to him. What did anyone want with a family nowadays? Children were a perpetual nuisance and anxiety, and from strictly impartial observation, he had come to the conclusion that the old-fashioned idea that they would ever regard their ageing parents with any sense of responsibility had exploded long since. Besides, who wanted children to manage and control one in one's dotage anyway? Not he! Freedom to live and freedom to die was all he asked—and no more ties whatsoever after that one fatal experience. So he had shaken off the unpleasant dust of his matrimonial venture and gone his way—cynically, selfishly, yet not wholly unlovably.

He often wondered why people liked him, for he was anything but a philanthropist himself. Probably his success was the attraction. This lower plane of which oft-times he found himself so disgusted an inhabitant worshipped success with a fulsome adoration such as, he imagined, the wretched old wanderers in the desert had bestowed upon their golden calf. It dazzled them—these sand-dwellers who were so miserably incapable of shining themselves. It amused him sometimes to draw his devotees on and see to what lengths they would go. And he took whatever they offered with a kingly disregard of consequences, because it could but give pleasure to them, poor fools, and was of no account whatever to him.

And through it all he had followed his star, treasuring and jealously guarding the gift which to him was above everything else in the world. He adored his art, even while he mocked at the mediums by which it was expressed. He was capable of putting the most wonderful work within his power of achievement into pictures whose originals inspired him with the most utter contempt. And he had the power of portraying the least prepossessing of his sitters in a pose so becoming as to inspire grateful astonishment. He was not a flatterer; he scorned flattery. But he had been blessed with an amazingly quick eye for artistic effect, and this again may have been part of the secret of his popularity. Disdain his subject though he might, he yet knew how to present it in an attractive guise, and he was regarded by many as little short of a magician. Apparently prejudiced, intensely set upon his own way, the results he attained were sometimes almost miraculous. He had the priceless faculty for discovering physical beauty in the most unexpected hiding-places. Allied to a Christian

spirit, it might have been a god-like trait. But in Peregrine there was little of the divine beyond his genius. Much that had been beautiful in his nature had passed with the passing of his mother. Perhaps it had been little more than the reflection of her goodness, and with his descent to the lower plane it had faded. His art had become an obsession to which all else was subordinate. It was his art, and nothing else, that had kept him from dropping to the depths.

And then had come that strange awakening—again through the medium of his art. As to a pagan worshipping towards the dawn, the sun had risen for him and flamed across his sky in tropical glory for a brief and burning season. He had been caught as it were into the splendour, too rapt, too entranced by his vision, to heed the ultimate issue. For the only time in his life his worship of beauty had transcended all else and he had cast even his art aside to enter the dazzling temple of his desire. And here he had dwelt a willing prisoner—master and slave in one—until the amazing noontime had flamed itself away. Even yet the memory of it thrilled him with an ecstasy that was unlike anything he had ever known or could know again. In all the centuries of the world there had been but one Cleopatra. In all the cycles of existence such a dawning and such a noontime could chance but once to some poor earth-dweller on the little unimportant planet that was after all but the third in order from its sun.

While the wonder had lasted he had been almost out of reach of himself—there had been periods in which he scarcely believed, when sober reason asserted itself once more. When the blinding glory had passed its zenith and the shadows began to lengthen he had crept from the darkening temple in a maze of doubt and bewilderment that had hardly begun to awaken in him a sense of loss. For after all he had known that it could not last. The favour of the gods is a transient shining at best, and to be caught into the innermost shrine was such a happening as not one in a hundred million could presume to anticipate. Dazzled, for a time half-afraid, he had gone back into the grey and practical world from which he had been so astoundingly transported. There had been no anguish of farewell, no suggestion of regret. He was as one who had walked for a space in the golden alleys of paradise and come forth again with the perfect memory of a perfect day which might never be again. And with the passing of time he had even some-

times wellnigh derided himself into believing that it had all been a dream. He had imagined the amazing experience which stood up like a glowing beacon in the midst of all those other experiences which had counted not at all. Out of the vivid artistry in which his soul steeped itself and had its being he had created for himself the fiery glory of that unearthly day. No memento or faintest sign remained to him. He had drunk too deep of some magic goblet, that was all. The glory that had come to him and departed again was of the elusive nature of all those wonder-pictures of his brain which no canvas would ever bear. Thus he had deluded himself, solaced himself, to make life bearable again. But nothing had ever been the same. With the setting of that sun, his own star had begun to wane. He realised it, though for a time he would not acknowledge it. His perceptions were as keen, his ideals as superb, but his inspiration was dimmed. The fever which is genius no longer urged him; desire had palled. There was something about his art at times which sickened him. Perhaps it was satiety. Or perhaps it was the knowledge that the topmost peak was for ever beyond his reach. He began to lose faith and patience where once he would have worked unceasingly for days and nights on end in his pursuit of the unattainable. He did not scoff at art, but his ardour was dulled, his spirit daunted. A sullen gloom settled upon him, from which at times he would tear himself free in a species of frenzy, as a man who fears paralysis, angry, frightened, desperate. Then indeed for a space he would work, madly and without restraint; but none but himself ever beheld the results of those chaotic hours. All that the outer world ever saw was the man himself when he emerged again wrapt in his mantle of gloom from the depths of which it was generally recognised that it was not advisable to attempt to extricate him.

It took time—years even, for him to realise that the kingdom had departed from him. Years of fruitless effort and subsequent destruction passed over him before his despair was complete and he recognised the bitter fact that his star was set. But out of the ruin of those years one thing had come to him—a gift which in Peregrine's estimation strangely eclipsed everything else. Straight from his temple of memory—straight from the altar-fire in which his genius had been consumed like incense—had come this fairy being, half-goddess and half-mortal, who was incredibly yet indisputably in many senses a tiny mirror of himself. She was like a

fire-fly, fluttering from heaven knew whence—a scrap of shining iridescence, elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp, yet enchantingly and comfortably real. For close upon five years now she had been his solace and delight. He had taught her nothing whatever, had simply let her grow as a flower grows, unfolding to the sun. And he had worked for her—slaved for her—become what his soul stood apart and regarded with amazement and contempt—for her; turning the poor shattered fragments of what had once been a sublime whole into the cheap and tawdry wares of a pedlar's pack.

Well, it was over now—the cruel wrenching asunder of all his ancient ideals, the degrading re-kindling of his smouldering ashes to an artificial use—his magnificent failures and his garish and despicable little successes were all past and finished. He only wished he could make one colossal bonfire of them all, and immolate himself in their midst, and the next moment laughed aloud in self-derision for harbouring the bare idea of so spectacular an exit from the petty stage of the third planet from the sun. . . .

That laugh of his, weak though it was, seemed in some fashion to clear his brain and bring him back to more immediate things. A soft voice spoke at his side.

“Are you awake, Carlo? Are you better?”

Awake! Better! He turned his dying eyes upon her.

“I shall be—much better—when I wake, Dona *mia*,” he said.

Her little hand stroked his soothingly. “Then go to sleep!” she whispered. “I’ll be here.”

He closed his eyes, murmuring her name, the name he had given her: “Dona—Dona Celestis!”

And she slipped down from her knees on to the floor by his bedside and sat there, watching with great wondering dark eyes the wheeling swifts whose nests were packed under the thatched eaves.

How beautiful they were—and how amazing the sweep of their wings in flight! And how strange of them always to come back to the one tiny nook above the window that was home! Dona thought that if she had been a swift she would not have come back like that. She would have flown over the housetop and on—on into the great world beyond, never stopping until she had seen everything there was to see. Though she loved to hear them

chuckling to one another, she could not help feeling that they were rather lacking in enterprise and humdrum in their ideas. It might be true, as Carlo had once suggested, that they had seen everything before they arrived and so had no ambitions left; but somehow she did not think it was true. Travellers they might be, but they could not be of a very exploring nature, or they would never be content to go on wheeling and squealing round and round in the same monotonous circles the whole long summer through. And chuckling and gossiping about it in their nests afterwards. How they gossiped! And what could they have to gossip about? Unless it was their babies! But no! Dona shook her head with the philosophy of nine-year-old wisdom. She was sure their babies could not be their only topic. There must be something else that grown-ups were interested in. Babies were all very well in their way, but they were not all that mattered in life. Carlo for instance—Carlo was not in the least drawn to babies. She did not think he was greatly attracted by his dear little water-colour sketches either that she admired so much, and that Frobisher displayed so enticingly in his shop-window next to the church for the benefit of all sightseers who passed that way. No, Carlo certainly thought of other things, and she was fairly sure that other grown-ups did also. There was dear Mrs. Conyers of Red Bean Mill—it was Dona who called it that—she was certain Mrs. Conyers, with her beautiful, peaceful face, had real grown-up thoughts, though she worked so hard.

And Michael Conyers, her son? No, she was not so sure of Michael. He probably thought of nothing but work. He always looked as if he did—as though he were forever wrestling with something in the struggle for his livelihood. He had brows that met with a bend in the middle, and though he was only twenty-two he looked as if he had been grown-up for many years. Dona stood in awe of Michael. He was rather like the black bull they tethered in the meadow below the Mill—a quiet enough creature on the whole, but with a propensity to violence which behoved the ordinary mortal to tread softly in his vicinity. Not that Michael was ever violent! At least so far as she knew. But then the black bull had never betrayed any violence in her presence either, and yet she was afraid of him. Why? She shook her golden head. It was very difficult to say.

Meantime, the swallows were thinking of roosting, and Carlo

had gone to sleep. This was doubtless a good sign. He had said that he would be better when he awoke. Poor Carlo! He looked thinner than ever lying there, his face like carved ivory on the pillow. And how oddly he breathed! Sometimes he seemed to forget to breathe at all, and then he had to breathe again very fast to catch up as it were. She amused herself listening to that strange respiration. It always slackened again and died down to nothing after those hurried efforts at recovery. She wondered if she ever breathed like that when she was asleep.

The little four-roomed cottage was very still, and the evening shadows were creeping in the apple-orchard outside. Dear Mrs. Conyers would be coming down from the Mill soon, bringing her bread and milk for supper. She would probably bring beef-tea for Carlo too; but it would be a pity to wake him. He had been so restless all day.

There was no fire downstairs. Carlo would never let her attempt to light it while he was lying ill, but Mrs. Conyers knew about everything and brought them meals every four hours from her own kitchen, so it didn't matter with the weather so soft and warm. Dona was quite content, so long as Carlo's breathing would let him rest. He had often been kept awake by it, and there had been fits of panting and gasping which had startled her, but these had become less frequent during the past few hours. He was evidently very tired, and a sleep would make him better. He had said so.

Curled up on the floor by his side, she began to feel a little sleepy herself. There was no bedtime for her in the ordinary sense of the word. She just went to bed when Carlo told her to, or, if he forgot, when she felt so inclined. And she got up in the same haphazard way. It did not matter when. With Carlo, life was a perpetual picnic. He had taught her to read and write in his odd moments, and she had learnt with avidity. Carlo was such an entertaining teacher. She had her own little sketching-block too, on which she used to try to copy those dear little woodland pictures of his, but fairy-queens and nymphs and gnomes had a way of creeping into hers, and then she would tear them up quickly before Carlo saw—because though he seldom laughed aloud for fear of hurting her she always felt that he wanted to. And these children of her imagination vanished at the first breath of ridicule.

Sometimes in the tiny room with the slanting ceiling which led out of Carlo's she would lie and dream of such things as she never saw around her—of palaces and deep blue seas and olive-skinned people who wore bright colours and spoke a soft melodious language which she felt she ought to know. Oddly enough, though in her dream she never distinguished any articulate words, yet she always seemed to grasp in a vague way what they were talking about. And sometimes her little feet would patter over marble floors and rich soft rugs, and she would laugh as she ran, because it was such a happy dream. And the sunlight was so strong, and there were so many, many flowers. . . .

Of course there were flowers—lovely flowers—here at Cragstone, water-lilies and yellow iris and forget-me-nots, but they were not the flaming, heavy-scented flowers of her dreams. They were pale, almost dull, in comparison—like shadows of reality. They lacked that riot of colour which always made her laugh for sheer joy. They lacked the fragrance which was even more wonderful. Carlo was wont to say that smell was the only sense that eluded artistic expression, and the only physical attribute which could not be turned into a vehicle for vice. Dona had no idea of what a vehicle for vice might mean, but she was sure that he was right. He was always right.

Silently the shadows lengthened. It must be nearly time for Mrs. Conyers to come. The grass of the orchard was so thick that her footsteps made no sound. The lifting of the latch was her herald; and when she heard that, Dona would creep down the steep stairs and tell her that Carlo had fallen asleep and had said that he would be better when he awoke. What a relief it was to know that he was going to be better! He had looked so pale and tired of late, and had been so listless and disinclined for work.

Once indeed, when she had placed his sketches near him in the hope of arousing his interest, he had spoken almost impatiently to her—a very rare occurrence. "Oh, take that beastly trash away!" he had said. "Do what you like with it! Burn it!" And she had hastened to remove the portfolio to a safe place out of his sight in case he should be tempted to kindle the fire himself.

But that was some time ago. He had never enquired about them or displayed the faintest desire to set pencil or brush to paper since. Though it was such glorious June weather he scarcely even

looked out of the window nowadays, and he never noticed the swallows chuckling in the eaves.

Sometimes she had thought that he seemed to be seeing a different sort of world. His eyes had such a far-off, thoughtful look. But they had never failed to come back and smile at her when she had softly spoken to him. She loved his eyes and the way they crinkled at the corners—as though he had often looked upon amusing things.

Even now, as he lay asleep, they seemed to be smiling behind their closed lids. She wondered if he were dreaming of her golden palaces and marble floors and beautiful, waving flowers. . . .

The dusk deepened. Mrs. Conyers could not be very long now. There was no milk left, and when Carlo awoke he would need it. Already he was stirring. His hands were opening and shutting very quickly. How strange they looked—almost as though they were trying to grasp at something as they lay on the coverlet. Ah! Now he was awake—really awake! His eyes were wide open, and they had a burning intensity—a dawning amazement—such as she had never seen in them before. He raised himself swiftly in the bed, and she started up, eager to fulfil his slightest wish.

But for the first time in the whole of her experience he looked beyond her—he *saw* beyond.

He spoke—not to her, but to himself in a quick, astonished whisper: “Not even—so much as—the lifting of a latch!” he said, and sank down again upon the pillow without seeing her.

It was at that moment that she heard the quiet lifting of the latch downstairs, and knew that Mrs. Conyers had come.

She crept to the stairhead. “He’s asleep!” she called down softly. “He woke up just now, but he’s dropped off again.”

“I’ll come up, dear,” said Mrs. Conyers.

She appeared at the foot of the stairs—a large, comely woman with a very peaceful brow above grey eyes that always regarded the world with a wide kindliness.

Quietly she ascended the creaking stairs, carrying a basket in one hand. She reached the top, and gently stroked the golden head of the child who awaited her.

“I’m afraid I’m a little late,” she said. “Mike wanted me for something. Asleep, is he? Ah!”

Her eyes had gone to the still figure on the bed. She drew a deep slow breath.

"He's better," whispered Dona rapidly. "He said he would be when he woke. And now—he's gone to sleep again."

Mrs. Conyers stood at the bedside, looking downwards, with reverence and a deep compassion in her eyes. "Ah!" she said again. "Poor man! He's gone."

"Gone!" echoed Dona. She too stood gazing upon the ivory face. It had a strange smiling look, and the eyes, half-open, seemed to be smiling too. "How can he be gone—when he's lying there asleep? Mrs. Conyers, how can he?"

Mrs. Conyers' gentle look came to her. She stooped and passed a loving arm around the slender shoulders. "My poor little lamb," she said very tenderly, "come away with me! He doesn't need you any more. He's dead."

PART I



CHAPTER I

THE CHARITY CHILD

TO DONA the thought of Carlo as it grew more and more remote in her memory was as a distant beacon-fire that had flared and died down. She did not mourn for him in the ordinary sense of the word. There was always the feeling somewhere at the back of her mind that the fire had never been wholly quenched, that at some time or other in his queer wayward fashion he would return to her. She could not believe that he had left her—his Dona Celestis—alone, unclaimed like an old umbrella left in a corner and forgotten.

Mrs. Conyers told her he was dead, but somehow Dona did not believe in death. Sleep she could understand, but death—what was it? Where did it begin—where end? Mrs. Conyers talked of a world beyond, and in that Dona willingly believed, but when Mrs. Conyers spoke of death as the impassable barrier between the two worlds, Dona's attention wandered. She was firmly convinced in her own mind that Carlo could and would return as soon as he felt in the mood to do so. His grave in the little churchyard conveyed nothing whatever to her. She simply could not realise that his body lay there. And even Mrs. Conyers was ready to admit that Carlo himself was elsewhere. So to Dona there was nothing in the whole thing but a temporary absence which caused her no distress. For though she was fond of Carlo, he was not one of the essentials of life in her estimation. His moods had always been of too variable a nature for her to lean with any real dependence upon him. His kindness had often been of a negative quality. There had been days together when he had wanted to be left alone, and so she had grown to rely upon herself for amusement and occupation to a very large extent. It was thus that she had come to be so constant and interested a spectator of the workings of the Mill. Such a wonderful place with its great machinery and pouring grain, and the water that roared away into the deep quiet stream beyond! They all knew her and had a greeting for her, from the grinning, ape-like Joe to the big, open-shirted, black-browed Michael who

sometimes, on rare occasions, took her into more remote recesses of the old building and showed her wonders not accessible to a casual visitor. She had a great respect for Michael. Everyone seemed to look up to him. He had weight. Even his mother deferred to him. In fact there was only one person apparently who did not seem to revere him, and for this person, strangely enough, it was Michael who showed a certain reverence. This was Garth Repton—a young man who in those early days held no appeal whatever for Dona.

It was a long time after Mrs. Conyers and Michael had taken her to live at the Mill that she even discovered his relationship there. His appearances were not very frequent, and when he came he always seemed to be on the very point of departure again. He was three years older than Michael but he looked younger, being of lesser build and less forceful colouring. His attitude towards both Michael and Mrs. Conyers, as indeed towards the world in general, was slightly overbearing, but so slightly that no one ever noticed it, except Dona, who resented it for some unknown reason and usually contrived to keep out of his way. Such self-effacement was quite unnecessary, for he generally looked over her head and would have ignored her altogether had not Mrs. Conyers in her gentle fashion insisted upon bringing her to his notice from time to time.

"I hope she's learning to make herself useful," he said once.

To which Mrs. Conyers replied with a fond hand on the child's golden head: "She's learning a great many things, Garth."

"Well, she'll need to," he commented with a rather hard look at Dona's shy flushed face, "if she's ever going to make up to you for all you're doing for her."

"Oh, we don't talk about that," said Mrs. Conyers gently. "Run along, Dona! See if you can find some apple-fallings!"

And as Dona slipped away she heard the young man say: "You'd much better bring her up to work, Mater. You work hard enough yourself. And I don't see why you should add a charity child to your burdens."

Dona wondered as she roamed pensively among the old apple-trees what a charity child was. It sounded like something rather contemptible on Garth's lips. Nothing that anyone else ever said gave her the same feeling. It was her first experience of adverse criticism, and it affected her somewhat as the first blast of the

east wind might affect a new-born lamb. She wanted to run away and hide.

But later a different feeling arose within her, and an odd desire to make some sort of impression upon him awoke her to fresh emotions. She had never disliked anyone in her life. There had never been any cause. Now for the first time the bitterness of antipathy entered into her. She was just twelve years old, and his scorn stung intolerably.

It was at about this time that she discovered his standing in the family. He was Mrs. Conyers' son by a former husband, and Michael's half-brother. He was a man of exceptional attainments, had obtained a University education through his own efforts, and was already regarded as one of the most brilliant of the younger school of doctors in London. Perhaps under such circumstances his slightly supercilious pose was hardly surprising. He had risen quickly. He was, moreover, the son of a professional man. Mrs. Conyers had married above her station, but this Dona did not find out till long after. Had she known it at the time she would not have understood it. For class distinctions at Cragstone were never very apparent.

There was Simon Garrett—the dear old retired schoolmaster who lived at his little homestead called Everest, with the redoubtable Mrs. Dipper and old Spademoore—to whom she went every day for lessons. But he treated all the world with the same courtly deference, even the crusty Spademoore who perpetually hoed and dug in the garden whatever the weather or time of year—even Mrs. Dipper with her pinched face and uncertain teeth who always seemed to be scrubbing something. And so Dona treated them all with deference too, until this new disquieting sense of resentment awoke within her and began to assert itself.

Normally, she was a very docile child. She gave Mrs. Conyers no trouble whatever, though possibly it would have needed a very perverse spirit to run counter to that gentle authority. But this vague contempt meted out to her by Michael's half-brother was a thing that rankled and hurt. She had no idea as to what it implied, but it aroused in her curious forces of which till then she had had no knowledge. It goaded her into her first active and intentional naughtiness.

It happened that Garth had come down for a week-end in June, and in the late dusk of the Saturday evening he had gone down the

mill-stream with his fishing-rod for the evening rise. Trout were fairly plentiful that year, and that particular stretch of river was Conyers property.

Dona knew all about the trout. She had watched them many a time from the bank, and she had also surreptitiously examined the elaborate fly-box which accompanied Garth and his fishing-rod. On that particular occasion she had been somewhat summarily dismissed to bed by Garth himself, and though it was past her usual hour she had deeply resented his discovery of the fact.

But the habit of obedience was strong within her, and she was actually undressed and in bed in the old raftered room they had given her for her own before sudden temptation assailed her. And then like a flash her whole being as it were caught alight from the spark.

She was alone in the old house, for Michael had gone to his office which was attached to the other side of the Mill to do his weekly accounts, and Mrs. Conyers was shutting up the chickens in the little field at the back. Mary, the village girl who came in to help, had left for the night.

Dona sprang from her bed and slipped to the window.

Outside all was peace. The mill-stream was still. Away across the meadows through the scented dusk she heard the thrilling far call of a nightingale. And from only a few yards distant there came the pop and bubble of a rising fish. Somewhere along that bank was Garth with his complicated fishing-gear, patiently trying to dissemble with those strangely discriminating creatures. He was an excellent fisherman, and he generally succeeded in deceiving some of them in the end.

The flame spread through her till her very body seemed on fire. Why should the detestable Garth come down and catch the fish that were Michael's? It was true that Michael was not a very keen fisherman himself, but that was not the point of the argument. It was hatred of Garth that animated and possessed her. And it was a new experience. Until that moment she had never hated anyone. It drove her—this consuming flame—beyond all bounds of reason and endurance, because of its newness. She had no weapon with which to oppose it. It was true that she went to church every Sunday with Mrs. Conyers and said the little stereotyped prayers morning and evening that the latter had taught her; but these things meant no more to her than the lessons

she learned by heart from old Mr. Garrett. She had not begun to know the meaning of sin.

And so the flame that consumed her became a driving force that compelled. There was nothing to hold her back, and a wild spirit of daring that was adventurous rather than vindictive drove her forward. She left the window on springing feet and leaped to the door.

Yes, the house was empty and very dark. A lamp burning in the kitchen threw a faint light upon the stairs. She glided down them like a wraith, and the next moment her bare feet were on the stones of the pebble path that led from the open door.

Her intentions at that stage were of the vaguest, but she meant to spoil Garth's amusement by some means; possibly by startling him, though as she reached the grass of the orchard she told herself that it would need someone bigger than she was to do that.

Noiselessly she sped to the bank of the stream. It was delightful out there in the coolness of the summer night. She might have been a will-o'-the-wisp in her scanty white nightdress which Mrs. Conyers said was getting much too small for her. Dona personally would not have minded discarding the garment altogether on that soft June night, for the further she ran, the more the spirit of magic that was in the air entered into her; and she would have laughed aloud but for the fear of betraying her presence to Garth.

It was not long before she espied him still some distance away on a bend where the bank curved towards the Monolith Woods. There was magic indeed in those woods. Mr. Garrett had told her of it, and it was in them that she had made her little pictures three years ago by Carlo's side when the gnomes and fairies were so persistent in their intrusion.

But for her objective which was too strong to be ignored, she would have turned aside up the slope to these woods now to look for them. She had often planned to do so some night, though instinctively aware that such a procedure would not meet with Mrs. Conyers' approval. For Mrs. Conyers smiled at fairies in a way that Dona found discouraging, and she never allowed her to sit up late.

But nothing could discourage her sense of adventure that night. The fragrance filled her with an ecstasy that was quite intoxicat-

ing, and, combined with the mischievous impulse which had been her original inspiration, swept her completely off her feet.

They scarcely seemed to touch the soft earth over which they ran, and almost before she realised it she was within a stone's throw of the fisherman, who, intent and wary, pipe in mouth, was whipping the stream with a juggler's dexterity.

She slipped out into the field behind him and hid behind a bush. The Mill looked a long way off. She had in effect run much further than she had realised. In the Monolith Woods another nightingale had taken up the melody, and the air was flooded with the music of a duet. The western sky was still a deep rose, and the trees stood black against it as though sketched in charcoal.

On any other occasion Dona would have stood with caught breath to wonder and admire; but to-night she was like a little imp herself—part and parcel of the magic.

Softly she drew nearer. The evening rise was at its height. The river was bubbling in all directions, and suddenly, when she was within three or four yards of the unconscious fisherman, his line reeled out with a rush almost to the further bank. She stopped short and stood as if turned to stone.

Garth uttered a sound that was like a sort of snarl of triumph, and then the battle began. Dona watched it, fascinated. To and fro rushed the hooked fish in its mad efforts at freedom, and the spinning wheel made a whirring accompaniment to its dance of death. Garth displayed a skill and patience that testified to the most unswerving determination. Nothing in his victim's wild careerings seemed to daunt him; actually to Dona's excited fancy he appeared to be gloating over its desperate struggles. And a curious tremor of fear went through her that increased her burning desire for vengeance.

It was over very quickly. The fish was conquered. It floated exhausted at the end of Garth's line, and he drew it to the bank and dexterously netted it. In the net it achieved a fresh spasm of struggling that lasted until he pulled it out, disentangled the hook, and put a final end to its activities with a single sharp blow against his boot.

That last deed galvanised Dona into swift movement. It horrified her into action. His calm satisfaction as he threw the dead fish on to the grass had almost something of a murderous quality in her eyes. With an odd little cry she swooped forward.

The fly-box—that wonderful collection of monsters—was lying on the bank close by. Without an instant's hesitation she seized it, lifted it high above her head, and flung it passionately out into the dark water.

CHAPTER II

THE REMEDY

GARTH turned round upon her with an exclamation. He was completely taken by surprise. But realisation was swift. Almost simultaneous with the splash of the fly-box in the water was his action. He caught her as she stood.

"You little devil!" he ejaculated.

She faced him, quivering, half-frightened by the grip on her shoulder, yet half-exultant also. She had at last succeeded in doing something worthy of his attention. With her bare feet clinging to the grass of the slanting bank she stood before him, deeply breathing, but silent.

He held her for some seconds before he spoke again. And during those seconds he recovered his composure while hers slipped away in a nameless agitation.

Then he spoke. "D'you know what you've done?"

His words were curt and clipped, but they held no anger. They were judicial in their calmness. She was quivering all over. It was with the utmost effort that she refrained from a wild struggle for freedom.

She answered him gaspingly, her voice almost gone. "Yes, I've thrown away your fly-box. I meant to."

"You meant to!" he said. "And why?"

That was what she would not tell him. In spite of her resolution, she began to wriggle in his hold, and her breathing quickened.

"Why?" he repeated with a kind of cold curiosity. "And what are you doing out here in your nightdress? What did you come out for?"

Somehow his questions made her burn all over, but with a new sensation. It was not anger this time, but a scorching, overwhelming feeling of shame. She suddenly realised that she had committed an outrageous act—an act of sheer madness. And he was angry with her, with a cold, judicial anger that would not make allowances.

Desperately she found her voice in a forlorn effort at self-defence. "I came out—because I wanted to. And now—now—now I'm going back."

"Oh, no, you're not," he said. "You'll go back in exactly three minutes' time—when I've finished with you."

His voice was still quite calm, but it held something that turned her suddenly chill and dizzy. His hold was so inevitable—so merciless. She threw back her head and looked at him. Somehow he seemed to have grown larger in those few seconds. Perhaps it was the effect of the gathering shadows, but he looked immense in the twilight.

Almost in spite of herself she broke into a panting entreaty. "Please—oh, please, let me go! They don't know I'm out here. No one knows. Mrs. Conyers wouldn't like it. Please let me run back!"

His hold upon her tightened. "No," he said. "She wouldn't like it. You knew that when you came out, didn't you?"

She shrank in answer and lowered her head again. She dared not meet his eyes. They were so grim and piercing.

"Didn't you?" he insisted, stooping a little over her as if to compel her reply.

She was shaking like a leaf. "Yes," she admitted in a whisper.

"And yet you came," he commented. "D'you think she'll punish you if she finds out?"

Punish her! Dear Mrs. Conyers! The idea was absurd. With fluttering breath she made answer. "Of course not! She wouldn't! She doesn't! She—she——"

He cut her short. "No. But you're not going unpunished for this. Do you know what I'm going to do to you? I'm going to give you the exact treatment you deserve. I know the remedy for most things—and I certainly know the remedy for this."

And with the words, before she had the faintest idea of his intention, he had her bent across his knee on the sloping bank while he proceeded forthwith to administer a most drastic and unsparing slapping.

It was a completely new experience to Dona and one of sheer agony. Apart from the physical pain, which was severe, the humiliation of it was such as to drive her into a nervous frenzy. She had never before been punished during the whole of her life. She had never before merited punishment. That she should merit

it now and that it should be meted out to her at the hands of Garth were facts which combined to overwhelm her utterly. He was not even angry apparently. After that first exclamation he had recovered full self-control, and he now carried out his purpose with a calm but quite merciless precision which made it all the more terrible to the child's overwrought fancy. He meant to conquer her rebellious young spirit, to teach her a lasting lesson, to achieve her entire subjugation so far as he himself was concerned, once and for all. But what he did achieve during those few moments in which he quelled her wild resistance and reduced her to sobbing submission at his feet was more than either of them realised.

He let her go when his professional experience warned him that he had gone far enough, and she lay convulsed in the wet grass by the side of the dead fish while he turned aside and re-lighted his pipe.

That was a thing which Dona always remembered. It made an impression upon her in the midst of her distress which was ineradicable. He was not in any way disturbed. Her anguish made no difference to him. He had punished her transgression and he took no further interest in her. Sharp as the punishment had been, it was as nothing to the thought that he had stripped from her every shred of reserve and self-respect, and regarded the deed as of no more importance than the cuffing of a puppy. It was that which wounded Dona cruelly, irremediably. She hated him for his callous composure even while her sense of justice told her that if he had acted in anger, his treatment of her would have been far less restrained. For it would have been in a fashion less galling and easier to bear. It was his deliberation that maddened her, and now that the actual infliction was over, the feeling of having been broken and cast aside drove her, exhausted as she was, into a frame of mind that bordered on insanity.

Sobbing and smarting, she lay huddled, waiting for some sign of relenting from her conqueror, and waiting in vain, till a fiercer flame than before kindled at length within her, goading her to action. She did not fully understand her own impulses. She was driven, it seemed, by a force outside herself. It was certainly not the gentle, docile child of Mrs. Conyers' adoption who finally drew herself together like a little animal prepared to spring and, still sobbing spasmodically, looked round for the man who had made her pay so bitter a penalty for her misdeeds.

He had moved a little further down the stream and was still smoking while he examined his remaining tackle. Apparently he was debating with himself as to whether it was worth his while to continue his pursuit of sport with the single, somewhat damaged fly which was left at his disposal.

Dona regarded him with burning eyes. To have approached him with open defiance would have been a feat beyond her courage. For a repetition of what had passed between them was unthinkable. Her sensitive body was still on fire from the castigation of his heavy hand, and uncontrollable tremors went through her every few moments at the horror of what he had made her undergo. She would never be able to face him again without that fiery shame sweeping over her. And to escape any future meeting with him was impossible while she lived.

It was this thought which finally urged her. Life with Carlo had been easy and natural, but it had not taught her self-control. This first taste of discipline had been of too severe a character. To be whipped for a fault was a possibility that had never occurred to her before, and now that it was an accomplished fact in her experience she was as one upon whom an indelible stamp had been branded. Nothing could ever undo that whipping. Nothing could ever restore to her, at least so far as this man was concerned, that shy girlish reserve and dignity which Mrs. Conyers had so tenderly fostered. Dona was no ordinary village child though she had been treated as such, and her wild exaggeration of the whole affair was inevitable. There was a fierce strain in her blood which reacted violently to any sort of violence. Though the punishment she had received had not been beyond the deserts of a normal child, its effects upon her were in a fashion catastrophic, penetrating to the very depths of her being, driving her to madness.

She measured the distance between herself and Garth for a space with eyes that literally blazed in her white face. And then suddenly with a choked sound that was half of anguish and half of fury she leaped to her feet, stood a second poised, aware of Garth's swift attention, then sprang forward with outstretched arms as one seeking deliverance and threw herself headlong into the deep-flowing river.

CHAPTER III

OUT OF THE DEPTHS

WITH a tremendous splash the waters received her and closed roaring over her head. Choking, she went down into unimagined depths of coldness; and then came the ghastly struggle for life. There were things down in that dark smother of water that seemed to clutch and hold her. It was as though she fought a battle of many hours against these unseen forces, and she thought she would never break free or breathe again. Yet in the end, in some unexplainable fashion, she escaped and, with nothing below and around her but the ice-cold, terrible water, she came up again, frantically struggling, into the open air. She had only time to utter a coughing scream before she sank back into the awful depths, but now the anguish was dulled. The bursting sensation in her chest, the frightful feeling of physical extremity, had begun to pass. It was the cold that gripped her most cruelly, reaching to her very heart. She seemed to turn over and over, like a stone rolling down a snow-bound slope, and at the end was darkness—immeasurable, illimitable, eternal. She did not know when she reached it or how she entered in . . .

The nightingales were singing again—perhaps they had never stopped—when strangely and quite unexpectedly she came to herself. She was lying on her face on the grass. Had she been asleep? Was it really grass? Or was she in bed, just returning from a fearful dream? And what was this curious, intermittent pressure upon her ribs? Someone was holding her down, it seemed. Why? What was happening? And what made her feel so cold and so deathly sick?

For a space she lay pondering while the strong hands that held her pressed and released, pressed and released, and finally, as a little gasp came from her, took her two arms and drew them slowly up and out above her head and down again. That hurt her and brought her back to consciousness with a rush. She gasped again, and tried to utter a tremulous protest which ended in a spasm of coughing.

And then, to her unutterable relief, the treatment ceased. She was lifted from her prone position and made to sit on the grass, firmly supported, with her head pressed forward until the dreadful nausea that possessed her found relief.

When this was over, her feeble strength was gone again, but consciousness remained, and she was mercilessly aware of violent cramping pains that gripped her whole body. She sat, huddled and shuddering, clad only in a rough, sporting jacket that had been thrown around her, until at length, without words, her companion lifted her, drawing the inadequate covering as close as possible, and bore her up the bank.

She lay in his arms quite powerless. The terrible happenings of that night had deprived her almost of the power to think. All she fully realised was the intense pain that she was suffering and the fact that Garth had somehow brought her back from the darkness that was death. She had no desire to escape from him. She could only cry weakly on his shoulder.

It was thus that they returned to the Mill through the scented summer darkness, to be encountered by Michael who had just locked up his office, and was on the point of sauntering down to see what sport his half-brother had been having.

Michael was smoking his pipe. He came to a dead halt in front of them, and Dona had a whiff of his strong tobacco that nearly brought about a return of the nausea that had racked her a few minutes before.

"What on earth——" said Michael in his deep voice.

And Garth made answer with the calm self-possession which he had cultivated through strenuous years of hospital work. "It's all right, old chap. She's been playing the fool and fell into the water. I fished her out. Go and get a blanket like a good fellow, and we'll put her in front of the kitchen fire while the mater gets a hot bath going. She'll be none the worse in a couple of days."

Easy and impersonal was his explanation, and Dona, faint as she was, knew a sharp sense of relief. If this were all he meant to tell, perhaps—perhaps that other unthinkable episode would remain for ever an unspoken secret between them. It would somehow be more bearable if no one else knew. There would be neither pity nor ridicule to add to her humiliation.

Then she heard Michael's voice again. "You're fairly soused

yourself," he said. "Give her to me, and go and get changed! We'll attend to her."

But something made Dona turn and cling to Garth. "Don't—don't!" she whispered, and could say no more.

But he understood; his arms closed slightly as though in answer. "I'm all right," he said. "I won't leave her at present. She's had a pretty bad immersion. You carry on!"

So, without effort, he retained command, and Michael turned back to the house to do his bidding.

Within a couple of minutes Dona was wrapped in a blanket and lying in a big arm-chair pushed close to the fire while her poor little frame writhed in the agonies of returning circulation. So acute were they that all other considerations departed from her, and when Garth knelt beside her and massaged the convulsed limbs she thanked him with piteous tears.

Then at length came Mrs. Conyers with her largest washing-tub which they filled almost to the brim with steaming water, and Garth unwrapped her and placed her in it covering her up to the chin with a towel; and thus finally the anguish passed.

Dona must have fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion in that comforting bath, for she remembered no more until she awoke in her bed with the noonday sun streaming in upon her, to lie wondering what had happened to her and why she felt so curiously unlike herself.

As soon as she began to move, she remembered, and a fresh wave of humiliation swept over her. She wanted to get up and hide, but somehow she could not. Her dreadful adventure in the river had left her very weak and exhausted. So she lay still, caught in a quivering apprehension of she knew not what.

She had not long to wait. The quiet opening of the door sent a violent start through her, and the next moment she made a weak attempt to cover her head with the bedclothes. For it was Garth who entered.

Composed as usual and looking slightly cynical, he came to her side and bent over her. "You needn't do that," he said, "because I'm going to have a look at you. How do you feel now you're awake?"

She could not tell him. She could only lie in panting agitation while he took one of her hands and sat down on the edge of the bed, his finger on her pulse.

"That's all right," he said finally. "What are you so worried about? Now tell me!"

But still she could not. She lay for a space palpitating under his scrutiny; then at length turned from him with a desperate effort that brought a rush of tears.

"Oh, come!" he said, half-laughing. "This is rather nonsense, what? Feeling cheap, are you? Well, you'd better stay where you are for the present. There's some bread and milk waiting for you. I'll go and get it. I've sent the mater to church. There was no point in her hanging about with you asleep."

He got up and sauntered towards the door. She scarcely heard him go, for her tears had overwhelmed her. So he had taken charge! Mrs. Conyers had left her. There was no escape from the shame and the ignominy of the situation. It had all got to be faced and endured.

When Garth returned with her belated breakfast, she was lying screwed up like a forlorn puppy against the wall, still hopelessly sobbing.

He set down his burden and leaned over her. "Now look here!" he said with authority. "We'll have no more of this. It's got to stop. D'you hear?" His hand pressed her shoulder admonishingly. "We've had enough nonsense. It's time you began to behave like a reasonable being. Leave off crying and turn round!"

There was insistence in his touch. She knew that if she did not obey it he would take immediate steps to compel her. Quaking and still weeping, she uncurled herself. He drew her to a sitting posture and wedged the pillow behind her.

"Come, that's better," he said in his practical professional tone. "Now get a little of this into you! I haven't given you much. You swallowed such a lot of the river last night that I thought you might not be feeling too peckish this morning."

He sat down again on the edge of the bed, his arm behind her, holding the cup firmly in front of her.

And, thus supported and encouraged, rather to her own astonishment, Dona began to eat.

The tears were still running down her face, but she gradually forgot them. For Garth's kindness, firm and matter-of-fact though it was, deprived her of any further desire to cry. Also, though she had not known it, she became aware that she had been very

hungry, and the bread and milk—a fare which she usually detested—slipped very comfortably into the void.

“Well done!” said Garth at length, removing the empty cup. “Now, don’t you think you’ve made rather a little fool of yourself?”

She did, but she could not tell him so. She turned instead with an appealing gesture and hid her burning face against his coat.

He patted her head unconcernedly. “Well, I suppose I shall have to forgive you. It was very naughty of you to jump into the river. I ought to give you another spanking for that by rights, but I’ll let you off this time if you’ll promise never to do it again.”

She clung to him convulsively. It was horrible to hear him speak so lightly of that punishment which to her had been red-hot agony, but it was better than having to go through it a second time. She strove very incoherently to give the required promise.

“All right,” he said finally. “We’ll say no more about it. You may be interested to hear that I managed to rescue my fly-box this morning, though there wasn’t much left in it. Anyway, it was easier than rescuing you, you young imp. There now! Sit up and be sensible!”

He propped her against the pillow and withdrew his arm, looking at her with a sort of casual curiosity.

“How old are you?” he asked unexpectedly.

“Twelve,” whispered Dona.

“Good gracious! What a scrap you are! I took you for about nine,” he said. “Well, you’ve had a lesson, my child, and I hope you’ll profit by it. It may comfort you to know that I haven’t mentioned your wilful misdeeds to anyone. They think it was all an accident. What possessed you to jump into the river, by the way? I suppose you knew I should have to go in after you and pull you out?”

“I don’t know,” murmured Dona.

“Well, you’re lucky to be here to tell the tale,” he commented, “though it isn’t one to be proud of. You can curl up now and go to sleep again. I’m going to keep you in bed to-day. What? You want to get up? Well, it isn’t what you want, my child, it’s what’s good for you. So you’ll stay where you are. Understand?”

Dona admitted that she did. He was quite unanswerable, being so obviously in the right in all his actions. He seemed to be one of those people who never make mistakes, and having instilled re-

spect into her there was no gainsaying his commands. To have disobeyed him would have been entirely beyond her ability.

She watched him walking up and down the uneven floor and smoking a cigarette with eyes of fascinated wonder. He had never taken any notice of her before, and while she recognised that it would have been far easier for her if she had never forced herself upon his attention, yet in spite of everything she did not regret having done so. The ascendancy he had asserted over her had in it a sort of fearful joy. The cold grey eyes that she dared not meet held a strange attraction for her. He had assumed almost colossal proportions in her estimation, and she wondered with an inward quiver what, if his condemnation were so terrible, his approbation would be. How amazing it would be if ever she could succeed in winning praise from him instead of blame!

He turned unexpectedly and came to her bedside. "What are you thinking about?" he said.

She coloured crimson. "I don't know. I—I—wasn't thinking very much."

"Yes, you were," he said. "Don't tell stories! What was it? Come! Tell me!"

She made an involuntary beseeching gesture with her two hands. "I was only wishing—something," she said piteously.

He laughed a little, flicking the ash from his cigarette on to the bare oak floor. "Well, what was it? Come on! Wishing you hadn't had that richly deserved spanking, or wishing I'd left you in the river to drown?"

She shrank at his cool questioning; her whole being caught afresh in a flame of discomfiture. Suddenly, to her own amazement, words rushed from her. "Oh, why do you make me hate you when I don't want to?"

It was the last thing she wanted to say to him, but she could not have suppressed it whatever the consequences. And, her passionate protest uttered, she sat with her knees clasped in her arms and her face hidden upon them in an access of miserable apprehension that was beyond tears.

She thought he would never break the silence and wondered wildly what was in his mind. She was like a prisoner waiting for judgment to be pronounced, and as it was still delayed she began to sob again heavily, hopelessly, as she had never sobbed when Carlo had left her.

It was then that Garth did a thing that was to stand out in her memory for all time. He sat down abruptly on the bed and took her in his arms.

"Oh, you baby!" he said. "Stop it!"

She lay across his knees in utter astonishment for a second or two, then with a curious sound turned and clung round his neck.

He held and rocked her, still half-laughing. "You're the oddest little scrap of rubbish that I've ever had to deal with," he told her. "Now suppose you dry up and have a little sense for a change! It's a pity you hate me if it gives you so much discomfort, but——"

"I don't—I don't!" asserted Dona, fervently kissing his collar which was all that she could reach. "It was only—only that I couldn't bear—to hear you talk of—of——"

"Well, but didn't you deserve it?" he reasoned. "Come, admit that, and we won't talk about it any more!"

She did not want to admit it, but lying in his arms, she could not help it, so overwhelming was the feeling that he could not possibly do wrong.

"Well, that's that," said Garth. "And now you're going to be a good girl, so bundle back to bed and begin!"

Again she obeyed him, though loth to leave the comfort which his hold imparted. But she still clung to his hand, covering it with abject kisses, until, still laughing, he withdrew it.

"That's enough for to-day. Now you lie quiet for a bit! I'll come round and look at you again presently. But you're not to get up, mind!"

And with that he left her, and she listened to his leisurely footsteps as he descended the stairs, and then lay in a sort of trance in which shame and exaltation strangely mingled—and hatred and adoration also. His kindness had taken her by storm, overwhelming her, but his supercilious amusement was like a scourge, cutting through its solace. If only he had not laughed at the tears which he had made her shed!

CHAPTER IV

THE HIDDEN TALENT

FROM that day forward Garth's visits to the old Mill House became a source of almost passionate interest to Dona—an interest of which she was half-ashamed and which she instinctively tried to dissemble. She would listen to Michael and his mother talking and try to catch Garth's name, or she would make little tentative remarks herself to Mrs. Conyers to lead her to the subject of her elder son in the endeavour to ascertain when next he might be expected to make his appearance. His visits were infrequent, but whenever they occurred she was in a ferment of excitement which she was at great pains to conceal. And when he came, she would wait about in odd corners to watch him, and if he spoke to her she was caught in such a turmoil of shyness and delight that it was hard to say whether his brief notice did not cause her more of discomfort than enjoyment.

When she knew that he was expected, she could think of nothing else. Her lessons ceased to be of the smallest importance, and old Simon Garrett used to smile behind his spectacles and prescribe a holiday until her wits returned from wool-gathering. He was always full of kindly consideration for her, and his patience was unfailing. It was not in him to show harshness to a child, and he was very fond of Dona.

She was fond of him also, but not with any ardent affection. Old Simon was the sort of person whom everybody liked in a mild fashion. He possessed neither depths nor heights. Mrs. Dipper, the spare, casual-toothed woman who managed his small household, regarded him with more of pity than respect.

"If I wasn't born honest," she would say, "I could ha' robbed him easy down to his last farthing, and he'd never ha' known it, not he!"

Dona stood somewhat in awe of Mrs. Dipper. She was one of the people whom it seemed advisable for no particular reason to obey. She was something of a martinet and possessed what old Spademoore described as a "rough edge" to her tongue. Not that

Dona was ever the victim of it! For Mrs. Dipper's harsh-voiced kindness was not far removed from indulgence so far as she was concerned. But her grimness of visage was of a type to inspire awe of itself. Dona never felt quite sure of Mrs. Dipper. Perhaps this was partly due to old Spademoore's attitude of wariness. For he always displayed great circumspection in his dealings with her, and not without reason. Mrs. Dipper never missed an opportunity of expressing the scathing contempt in which she held him, and she seemed to have an almost uncanny knowledge as to the amount of time he spent in the taproom of "The Green Dragon." As he never contradicted her on the subject, Dona concluded that Mrs. Dipper was always right.

Her lessons with Uncle Simon, as she called him, were not of a very arduous nature. He had his own way of instilling knowledge, and it was a method which involved harder work for the teacher than for the pupil. Infinite perseverance was his principle, and what was not learned one day was relearned the next until at last it remained fixed in the child's memory. Dona frequently found this means intensely wearisome, but it was effectual in the end. For after several days of labouring over the same ground with complete slackness she would suddenly awake to such an access of boredom as would prod her energies into mastering the matter at lightning speed simply to get rid of it. Then old Uncle Simon would smile upon her and let her go early as a reward.

He was the reverse of brilliant himself, and so, possibly, he did not suspect the fact that, with application, Dona could achieve in half an hour results which usually involved a whole morning's work or even longer. If a thing appealed to her, it would be done in a flash. But if not, she would sit and dream for hours, mechanically enduring her teacher's patient efforts to drive in the uninteresting piece of knowledge. She was never wilfully naughty. Neither of them regarded this behaviour as in the least blameworthy. Old Simon had been accustomed for many years to trying to push instruction into unreceptive vacancies, and he was only surprised when Dona displayed any aptitude at all. After all, there was plenty of time, and no need to press the child unduly.

He knew that the daily routine was dull to the juvenile mind, but he was too old and lacking in inspiration to do anything to

relieve the monotony. Dona was his only pupil, and she made a pleasant interlude in his life.

As she grew older, she gradually and hardly perceptibly took charge of her own studies, having at length mastered such matters as Simon regarded as the main essentials to education. They still went through occasional examinations, but Dona's quick memory was more than equal to such emergencies, and he was fully satisfied that in the ordinary, workaday world she could hold her own. And so they went on to higher things, but always on the same principle of thorough mastery. Simon did not believe in skimming the surface of anything. He never countenanced her eager tendency to glance at a thing and then leap on to something fresh. That was mere pleasure-seeking, not education, and while under his tuition Dona was obliged to curb herself. But when she was alone, she made up for it.

The little weird woodland sketches that she made were never finished and no one ever saw them. They were the only outlet of the secret fire that burned within her, and they had a wayward grace that would have delighted Carlo's eye. But she invariably destroyed them and hid all traces. They were seldom more than fragments, and she was far too shy to display them, even to Mrs. Conyers whose sympathy over ordinary things was unfailing. There was no one in her small circle of acquaintances who would have understood. Even Carlo had sometimes laughed at her efforts, though certainly in an understanding way. She often wished that Carlo had not died, for there had been a bond between them which was unlike any other tie in her experience. Mrs. Conyers, all her kindness and solicitude notwithstanding, was quite, quite different. One did not look for more than maternal comforts from her.

Then there was of course Michael—Michael with whom she sat at the same table every day, but whom she knew no more intimately now than in those long-ago days when she and Carlo had lived in the little cottage at the end of the orchard with the thatched eaves in which the swallows built and chuckled. Michael was a perpetual enigma. He looked so dark and formidable, and though he had never uttered a harsh word in her hearing, she was always half-afraid of him. She was not alone in this, for everyone about the Mill seemed to stand in awe of him, and his word was law. He lived a strenuous life, and he seemed to have the gift of

extracting work from others, for there were none but hard workers in his employ. A man of few friends and still fewer enemies, he went his way, neither asking nor bestowing favours, curt of speech and severely practical in all his actions; no, one would never expect any artistic perception from Michael.

When he leaned on the parapet of the river-bridge at night, smoking his pipe and gazing down into the flowing water, he was not seeing the crystal depths below him or the darting brown fish, or hearing the rustling reeds along the bank or the last ecstatic notes of the thrush in the weeping ash; he was only thinking of the next day's work, thinking of something he must tell Joe in the morning, or of some mechanical defect in the Mill which must receive attention. She had a great admiration for Michael from a distance, and often she would watch him when he was not looking. But near at hand she was like a shy bird, and when he spoke to her she always answered as briefly as she could and slipped away as quickly as possible into the background. He never appeared to take any great interest in her, but he and his mother were agreed upon the point of giving her as good an education as circumstances permitted and keeping her apart from the village children.

The only child she knew was Kitty Frobisher, the stationer's daughter, an amiable little creature of her own age, quite empty of ideas at that stage and always willing to be amused by Dona. To her indeed at times, for lack of a better audience, Dona would confide some of her fantastic flights of imagination, but she never showed her any of her serious sketches. Only now and then, for fun, she would draw a familiar face or figure for Kitty's edification, or even—to please her—an impression of Kitty herself, a lightning portrait snatched at an angle of sheer artistry, such as Carlo himself might have produced. Girlish and untried as were her efforts, she knew within herself that they possessed some sort of merit, and they won from Kitty the most unbounded admiration. Her only grief was that Dona should so mercilessly insist upon the destruction of these works of art. But Dona would listen to no persuasion.

"They're only silly little pictures," she would maintain. "I'll do much better than that some day."

And so none but Kitty, who was sworn to secrecy, even knew

of the gift which she so jealously guarded behind the barrier of her shy reserve.

Perhaps it was as well. For even encouragement would have marred the fairy gossamer of Dona's fancies during those growing years, and ridicule would have completely destroyed it. In this her instinct guided her aright, and the hidden talent developed undisturbed on its own mystic lines with none to approve or to gainsay. She never laboured at it, never even approached it unless the mood were upon her. But in secret she dreamed her dreams, and in secret the gift which had been Carlo's grew and spread like a plant in some jealously guarded corner waiting for the dawning of the sun which should call it into blossom.

CHAPTER V

KITTY FROBISHER

MEANTIME, through all those growing years, the visits of Garth to the Mill House continued to be the greatest and most absorbing interest in Dona's life. He did not come often, he never stayed for long, but in a fashion that was unexplainable his presence altered the whole atmosphere of her existence. She was always thrown into a state of nervous excitement by his proximity which seemed to make a different being of her. Any notice from him would send her into a fever of oddly-mingled emotions in which gratification and dread were uppermost. She never knew whether she liked or hated him, so conflicting were the sentiments he produced in her. There was one thing about his treatment of her which she often resented, for it was a direct and inevitable outcome of his summary punishment of her on the night on which he had saved her life. And that was the tone of authority he adopted towards her. He would send her on errands or give her odd jobs to do for him such as Michael would never have dreamed of suggesting, all with a careless complacent air as though he were bestowing a favour upon one immensely inferior.

In a sense he appeared to regard her as a sort of attendant—far more insignificant than a younger sister—upon whose services he had every right to rely. But he was kind also in a tolerant sort of way, and, true to his word, he never made the faintest reference to the occasion which had first brought her into prominence with him. His orders were firm and definite, and Dona never dreamed of disobeying them. Also, even while resenting she welcomed them, because they brought her into touch with him. For the fascination he had for her endured through all. She liked to be of service to him, to prepare his room, to mend his clothes, even to tie flies for him when he came down to fish. This was a delicate task with which she was very proud to be entrusted, and one in which she rapidly developed considerable skill. He was extremely difficult to please in the matter and would often throw away specimens upon which she had spent hours of toil, but if he

retained one or two she would glow with pride and be fired to fresh endeavour by the most casual word of praise.

His attitude towards her never varied. He treated her always as though she were a child and took no interest in her progress or development. When she was seventeen she might still have been the mischievous sprite of twelve whom he had once chastised. Dona herself did not feel any older when he was there, though when he was gone again she often wondered how he failed to notice the difference.

For at seventeen Dona began to realise that she was beautiful. The knowledge came to her like a slow dawning, for Mrs. Conyers never encouraged any approach, however innocent, to personal vanity. She was a woman of great simplicity and old-fashioned ideas, and possibly she regarded that growing loveliness with something of apprehension. It was Kitty Frobisher who first brought the subject into prominence. She was now serving in her father's shop and, as she expressed it, beginning to make her way. She possessed a certain prettiness herself of a light and somewhat frivolous nature, and she knew how to make herself attractive to the young swains of Cragstone.

The childish friendship between herself and Dona still persisted though there was not much in common between them. It was from lack of choice rather than any other motive on Dona's side, though she was mildly fond of Kitty. From Kitty's point of view the reason was not quite so obvious. But Kitty was romantic after a strictly conventional and unimaginative fashion, and to her mind there was something of a regal nature about Dona.

"I often think you're a sort of princess," she said one day when they were having a picnic-tea together on the river bank. "You've got such a wonderful way of holding your head."

"I!" said Dona in surprise.

Kitty nodded. "Like a princess—just like a princess. I've often wondered how you do it. I know I can't."

Kitty, being short and plump, though quite pleasing to the eye, could never have achieved stateliness under any circumstances.

Dona, slim and lithe, lay in the flowering grass with a nymph-like grace that was wholly unconscious of itself. "I don't do it," she said slowly. "I've never thought about it."

"You wouldn't," said Kitty with just a hint of superiority in

her voice; she was Dona's senior by six months. "You've not even begun to think about making the best of yourself."

Dona flushed a little. She had begun to try effects with her golden hair in front of the little green looking-glass in her bedroom, but she had no desire to admit this to Kitty. Besides, in her own opinion her efforts had not been very successful.

But Kitty's easy chatter skimmed over her momentary discomfiture. "Well, there's one thing; you've no need to. You couldn't be anything but good-looking if you tried."

That startled Dona slightly; for Kitty was too practical to be anything but impartial. She sat up and tried to visualise herself.

"Am I really good-looking?" she asked incredulously.

"Jim Wallis thinks you're a peach," said Kitty.

Jim Wallis was the son of the tobacconist whose shop was next door to her father's. He was something of a wag in the village, and most of the girls smiled upon him; but Kitty would never commit herself either way with regard to him.

At mention of his opinion Dona's face took a frozen expression. Jim Wallis's easy familiarity revolted her.

"Oh, I forgot you didn't like him," said Kitty. "He is a bit too low in some ways. But he's a fair judge of looks anyhow, and he thinks you're It."

"Detestable bounder!" said Dona between her teeth.

Kitty laughed with easy merriment. "Oh, my dear, they're all like that—treat us as though we were goods in a shop-window set out to attract them! I suppose we are in a sense—till we get married."

She was not prepared for her companion's reception of this doctrine. Dona leaped to her feet and stood straight as an arrow and quivering as if on the verge of flight. Her dark eyes were like flames under their black brows. She did not know that she was like a young goddess, but Kitty sensed it—vaguely.

"My word!" she said. "I don't wonder he looks at you as often as he can. But there! Sit down! We won't talk about him if you don't want to."

"Why should he look at me?" demanded Dona, with delicate nostrils dilated. "He—I—hate the very sight of him!"

Kitty chuckled. "I expect that's why. They always want what they can't have, and you're a bit extra and out of the common. It's your hair, I believe; it's such a lovely deep gold—like sun-

flowers. Of course you ought to have had blue eyes—that's the only drawback." Kitty's own were like round bits of china. "But I expect men would think dark ones more unusual. Anyhow, you're very good-looking. I believe you'll be really handsome one day. Do sit down! There's nothing to get excited about."

Dona subsided upon the grass and lay with her face down among the cool damp stems. She could not have explained the sense of outrage that possessed her, but Kitty was far too superficial to pay any serious attention to it.

"It's silly to be shy," she said. "You miss a lot of fun that way. I made up my mind long ago that I'd never be that." She giggled self-consciously. "Men like plenty of ease of manner and go-as-you-please in girls nowadays."

"I don't care what they like," said Dona deeply into the grass.

"That's very old-fashioned of you," said Kitty. "It's a real pity you never went to school, I think. Old Simon is so very antediluvian. When are you going to leave him?"

"I don't know," said Dona.

"You can't go on having lessons for ever," pointed out Kitty with the superiority of one who had been emancipated from the bonds of educational discipline for the past three years.

"I'd be very sorry to leave him," said Dona.

It was odd, but though she had outgrown old Simon's teaching for some time, she had never contemplated the possibility of giving up his tuition. It would leave a gap in her life which she might find it difficult to fill.

"You're getting too old for lessons," was Kitty's comment. "I wonder you don't want to kick up your heels a bit and have some fun."

Dona propped her chin on her hands to consider the matter. The annual fair at Graybridge and the summer *fête* and flower-show at Cragstone Park were all she knew of fun. Mrs. Conyers was a woman of practically no close friends. Perhaps her first marriage had cut her off from them. And she had never encouraged Dona to mix with the village society in which Kitty was an acknowledged *belle*. Dona had never had the slightest wish to do so, and her lessons with Simon, humdrum as they were, had left her little time for the frivolities in which Kitty revelled. Her old longing to see over the edge of the nest was still dormant

within her, but her lessons kept her mind occupied so that she hardly realised the passage of time. The future was like a far horizon, so dim that any advance towards it was imperceptible. She would grow up some day, and life would change. As Kitty said, she could not go on having lessons for ever. What would she do when lessons were over? She did not know.

"I'll tell you what I should do," said Kitty's matter-of-fact voice. "I should want to work and make a little money—same as I do. I simply wouldn't go on being a schoolgirl at your age."

Dona looked up. She was used to being patronised by Kitty, but on this occasion there was something about her easy criticism that pierced her. "Oh!" she said. "You think I'm lazy. Is that it?"

"My dear!" said Kitty. "Of course not! It's only that to my mind you're rather throwing yourself away. And you're too good-looking to do that—if you know what I mean."

Kitty's conversation usually drifted back to looks. They were after all the summit of ambition—the main artery, as it were, of existence.

"I wonder what old Uncle Simon would do," said Dona reflectively.

Kitty shrugged her shoulders. "He can't expect to keep you for ever. Besides, he's very old—getting childish, I shouldn't wonder. I don't suppose he teaches you much, does he?"

"No. I think I know nearly all he knows," Dona admitted. "But still——"

She left her sentence unfinished. She did not want to confess that without Uncle Simon she herself would feel strangely at a loss.

"Well, you'll only be young once," said the practical Kitty. "I'm glad my schooldays are over anyhow. One's got to think about the future, and girls can't begin too soon these days. D'you know that little beast Clara Rudd is engaged to be married? She showed me her ring last Sunday—such a rubbishy thing as I wouldn't be seen dead in. But still, it just shows, doesn't it?"

What did it show? Dona scarcely knew, and certainly she was not interested. Clara Rudd was the daughter of a very inferior farmer, commonly known as "the pig man" in Cragstone. Kitty was nominally on terms of friendship with her, but Dona hardly knew her.

"Who is she engaged to?" she asked idly.

Kitty gave a contemptuous laugh. "Why, Sam Binns—of all people! I don't suppose you know him. He's an awful outsider—the barman at 'The Green Dragon'. I'd never look at him myself. But then—beggars can't be choosers, and she'd do anything to get married—that girl. I shouldn't be surprised if there were some reason for it."

"Some reason?" echoed Dona uncomprehendingly.

Kitty tossed her head. "Oh, you know what I mean. She's no class—and living on a pig-farm, what could you expect?"

"I don't know," said Dona, failing to follow the drift of these deductions but conscious of a certain distaste for them notwithstanding. "Let's have tea, and then, if you'll promise not to talk, we'll go down to the weir, and I'll show you that kingfisher's nest."

"Anything you like, my dear," said Kitty tolerantly. "Only don't ask me to get my shoes wet! They're the only decent pair I've got."

"You'd better take them off then," said Dona. "I'm going to take off mine."

"What a child you are!" laughed Kitty. "Well, well, I suppose I must be one too—just for once. I hope the midges won't be biting, that's all."

"They never get bad till sundown," said Dona.

"Then we'll come back early," said Kitty. "I must see Mrs. Conyers before I go."

CHAPTER VI

THE LAST LESSON

IT WAS always Kitty's plea—to see Mrs. Conyers before she left, though Mrs. Conyers in her kindly way generally seemed rather surprised to see her. She and Michael were seated at a late tea in the old oak-beamed parlour when the two girls entered, but Michael rose at once to return to his work.

Kitty greeted him with arch cordiality. "You mustn't let me keep you, Mr. Conyers. I know you never have a minute to spare. But I must see the Mill working before I leave. I may, mayn't I?"

"Of course," he said. "Go into the machinery-room if you care to! Joe'll be there."

"How interesting!" said Kitty, the china-blue eyes upcast. "I suppose you're always there too—always busy?"

"Oh, I'm haymaking to-day," said Michael, opening the door a little wider to pass out. "We've got a lot to get through before nightfall."

He went out to his meadows, and Kitty, looking a little wistful, transferred her attention to Mrs. Conyers. "And I suppose you are very busy too. Everybody is. There's so much to get through. I welcome Wednesdays to get through a little household work as a rule."

"Sit down!" said Mrs. Conyers. "Have you had plenty of tea, or would you like another cup?"

"Oh, I couldn't, thank you!" protested Kitty, dropping on to the broad window-seat. "And I mustn't waste your time either. Only I so seldom see you."

"There's no time wasted," said Mrs. Conyers. "I've always got some work on hand."

She took her work-basket from a side-table and sat down with the words to mend a shirt of Michael's.

"I'll clear the tea-things," said Dona, beginning to pack them on to the tray.

"No, don't, dear!" said Mrs. Conyers quietly. "We'll do them

later. Come and sit down! I've got something rather sad to tell you."

"Oh, what?" said Dona. Her thoughts flew rapidly round the circle of things dear to her. There were Tommy the pony and Dash the spaniel and Polly the cat and her own precious bullfinch Billy, Joe's gift, who lived in her bedroom. Could harm have come to any of them? And then another possibility occurred to her so curiously like a stab in the heart that it left her pale and breathless. Could anything terrible have happened to Garth?

"There, darling, don't be upset!" said Mrs. Conyers, tenderly watching her. "It's bound to happen some time, you know, when people get old."

Dona's heart gave an odd thump of relief. Someone old did not matter so much. It was one of the villagers then—old Spademore perhaps, or old Mrs. Best, who had been bedridden ever since Christmas. Joe Best would be dreadfully sorry if his mother died, but she did not think anyone else would mind very much. Still, of course, as Mrs. Conyers said, it would be rather sad.

"Who is it?" she asked, feeling the blood rushing up again into her face with the reaction. Of course it could not have been Garth! Even Mrs. Conyers could not have kept so peaceful a front had it been Garth. She stretched out a loving arm to her now, and Dona went and stood within it, waiting to hear the sad news wondering a little that she should be expected to be upset.

Mrs. Conyers drew her gently close. "I'm afraid it will mean a lot to you, darling," she said, "but you mustn't grieve too much. It's poor old Uncle Simon. He's had a stroke."

"Uncle Simon!" Dona echoed the name rather blankly. "Oh! Is he dead?" she said.

"Really, Dona!" ejaculated Kitty, shocked at the baldness of the question.

But Dona did not heed her. "Is he dead?" she repeated, looking down into Mrs. Conyers' kind face with eyes of earnest searching.

The encircling arm tightened about her. "No, dear, not yet," said Mrs. Conyers. "But the doctor said it was quite hopeless. He is unconscious and he will probably be gone by the morning."

Gone! As Carlo had gone, leaving her to the chance care of any who might be at hand! Somehow the thought of Carlo smote her with a strange force at that moment. She had long ceased to

expect him to return, but she had not thought of him as passed for ever beyond that cold, impenetrable barrier called death. It came to her now with a sense of shock. Carlo had really died, just as old Uncle Simon was now dying. She had been too young to realise it at the time, but the death of Uncle Simon was to bring it home to her. There would be no more visits to Everest, no more lessons—only a curious, unfathomable blank—a feeling of being left in the lurch—a sense of calamity and emptiness deep down within her that made her want to cling to someone.

She turned and clung to Mrs. Conyers now with a blind wonder at her heart as to what would become of her if that supporting arm also were some day to be withdrawn from her reach.

“Poor lamb!” said Mrs. Conyers softly, just as on that day years ago when Carlo had gone. “You’ll miss him, I know.”

“He must be at least eighty,” said Kitty. “And anyhow she couldn’t have gone on much longer.”

“That’s true,” said Mrs. Conyers. “But she’ll miss him just the same.”

Dona spoke in a hushed voice. “I think I’d like to go over and see him. He might—like me to be there.”

Mrs. Conyers kissed her fondly. “No, dear. He wouldn’t know you. Michael said I mustn’t let you go, and he’s quite right. It would only distress you and do no good.”

It was very seldom that Michael gave any directions concerning her, but Dona recognised that his right to do so was indisputable. His word was law in the Mill House. She relinquished the idea without discussion. The thought that her old friend with whom she had been working only that morning would not know her gave her a cold sensation of misgiving. The young life pulsing within her shrank instinctively. She turned and looked out into the warm sunshine.

“I think I’ll go for a walk in the woods,” she said. “You don’t mind, do you, Kitty? I’ll see you again very soon.”

“I must be thinking of getting home,” said Kitty, “or I’d come too. Good-bye, my dear!” She came to Dona and kissed her. “I shouldn’t take it to heart too much if I were you. We’ve all got to go some time after all, and he’s a very old man.”

“Yes, I know,” said Dona.

Kitty’s commonplaces were always unanswerable and they sounded rather meaningless to her just then. It was odd that

death should invariably come as a surprise, but there was no evading the fact. She would miss old Uncle Simon more than anybody else would—except perhaps Mrs. Dipper and old Spademoor. But they would regard his death just as Kitty did, as sad but inevitable and they would soon get over it. It would not make such a definite mark in their lives as it would in hers.

As she went out by herself into the evening sweetness, it was with a conscious desire to escape any further consolations; it was easier to get used to things in solitude.

Almost mechanically she took the path by the river, wandering along among the pollard willows, deep in thought. It was quite true, as Kitty said, she was getting beyond the schoolgirl stage. She was growing up, and it was time that she began to look to the future. She knew with absolute conviction that Uncle Simon would never teach her again. The lesson he had given her to learn only this morning would never now be learnt. Where would be the use of learning it without him either to praise or gently chide? No one else in the world cared whether she learned it or not. Henceforth if she learned at all, it would be of her own volition. There would be no outside impetus at all. Mrs. Conyers was busy with her housekeeping, Michael was busy with the Mill. And a queer thought flashed upon her. Perhaps, all their kindness to her notwithstanding, she mattered no more to them, deeply, fundamentally, than—if as much as—Uncle Simon mattered to her! And—Garth? Well, of course she did not—could not—matter to him. She was no more to him than the kneeling slave was to Cæsar when he held the silver bowl for the imperial hands to wash. He was probably thinking of other and far more absorbing things even when making use of her.

Suddenly life seemed very mean and insignificant to Dona. She was indispensable to no one and horribly unimportant. What she did or what she left undone would matter not one jot to anyone when Uncle Simon was gone.

She reached the track that led up the grassy hill to the Monolith Woods. They always attracted her in the evening. There was something of magic in their dim silent depths with the strange, moss-grown boulders standing up here and there in their long aisles, which might have been Nature's monuments to some long ago upheaval or the relics of an ancient worship when man had first begun to awaken to the existence of a God.

They looked spectral standing there in the green gloom. There were some who would not go near the Monolith Woods at night, but they held no dread for Dona. Nothing hostile had ever crossed her path. With Carlo she had lived so close to Nature that she had never feared the dark. She knew that Mrs. Conyers did not like her to be out too late, but the sun was only just behind the hill; it had not really set. So she wandered up into the quiet shadows, sad at heart and awed by the vagueness and immensity of life.

CHAPTER VII

THE NEW MASTER

IT WAS as she reached the brow of the hill in the very midst of the wood that she heard it—a single deep note from the tower of the village church. It sank down into her heart like a stone dropped into a well, and a sense of chill went through her, so slow and fateful was the sound.

That was the passing-bell; and she stood and counted the seconds till a whole minute had gone by and it came again. So Uncle Simon was dead! She remembered how shaky he had seemed that morning and how weary and lined he had looked—and other small signs which had not made much impression upon her at the time. Poor Uncle Simon!

There would be no going to Everest to-morrow or the next day or any day thereafter. The little house would be empty—like the tumble-down cottage at the end of the orchard where she had once lived with Carlo; and Mrs. Dipper and Spademoore would have to find another patron. And Uncle Simon? Where would he be? Would he find someone else to look after him, or would he be left alone to fend for himself in his new habitation wherever it was? Something caught at her throat, and she put her hands up to it involuntarily. She wished with a sudden hot intensity that she could tell him how sorry she was that he had gone, and how she hoped—how very much she hoped—that he would be happy.

And then, before she knew it, strangely, inexplicably, she was crying, caught as it were in a rush of tears which she was powerless to stem. She was close to one of the mystic grey stones. It had a rough ledge along one side of it that was rather like a crudely cut bench, on which she had often sat and dreamed, and she dropped down upon it and gave full vent to her grief. Life would be so very different, so pointless, without the daily pilgrimage to Uncle Simon.

Some minutes must have passed ere her distress had spent itself, and even then she would not have lifted her head but for a

curious feeling piercing her consciousness, an unaccountable conviction that she was not alone. Quickly she lifted her head and looked around, her eyes still half-blinded by tears. And there a few yards below her, leaning against a tree as though on guard, she saw a man's figure.

His face was turned from her, he seemed to be contemplating something some distance away in the opposite direction; but there was no mistaking the broad outline or the work-a-day clothes. She would have known that blue cotton shirt of Michael's anywhere. He wore it open at the neck with the sleeves rolled up to the shoulder when he was haymaking.

Startled, she stood up and watched him. Had he seen her? Or was he there by accident? She could scarcely believe the latter, for Michael could hardly be persuaded to leave his meadows when work was in progress. He had only come in to tea because he meant to continue his task until nightfall. She had never known him leave the job in hand unless compelled. And so the chances were that he had seen her and was waiting to speak to her.

Again the solemn note of the passing-bell came floating up from the valley, but her tears were gone. She stood in hot embarrassment, quivering, uncertain. And in that moment he turned squarely and deliberately and faced her.

Across the intervening space they looked at one another, and then at a small backward movement on Dona's part, Michael spoke, his deep voice slightly raised.

"I say, don't go away! I want to talk to you."

His tone was gentle; it had a reasoning note. Dona passed a swift hand over her eyes and went slowly towards him.

He moved to meet her over the moss-grown earth. "So you came up here to cry!" he said.

She shook her head, her lips still trembling. "No—I didn't. Only—when I heard the bell—I couldn't help it."

"Ah!" he said. "Yes. The old chap's gone. He's been failing, you know, for a long time. P'raps you didn't notice?"

"No," said Dona.

He was not looking at her very closely, and apparently he seemed to think her tears were only natural. She was grateful to him for that.

"It's better to go quickly when the end comes," he said. "I

expect the hot weather finished him; but it was better than lingering. He didn't suffer."

"Carlo didn't suffer either," said Dona.

"Who? Oh, your——" He stopped himself. "Well, it's always a mercy when it's cut short. Life can be a curse and not a blessing. My own father was an almost helpless invalid for five years, so I know."

"That must have been dreadful," Dona said. "Poor Mrs. Conyers!"

"Yes. She never talks about it. But I sometimes wonder how she came through." He spoke with a sort of repressed reverence. "She is like that. She'd carry on till she dropped—and never tell a soul."

"Yes. I believe she would," said Dona.

He gave her a sudden glance. "She's getting on in life," he said. "I've often thought it was a pity she never had a daughter. A son can never do as much."

Dona found herself flushing. "She'll never let me do very much," she said. "But I would. You know I would. Don't you?"

"Yes," Michael said. "I do. She's always been so set on your having a good education. I suppose she was right—in a way. But now——" he paused.

"Yes?" said Dona with a touch of eagerness.

He looked away from her into the green depths of the wood stretching below them. "I was going to say you'll have more time on your hands," he said slowly. "You could take the place of a daughter—if you would."

"Oh!" said Dona rather breathlessly. "Do you think she'd let me?"

A faint smile touched his rugged face. "If she won't, you can come and help me in the office," he said.

"Oh!" said Dona. "I would love that!"

He looked at her again keenly, as it were appraisingly. "Why?" he asked.

"I'd feel I was being useful," she said, with shining eyes. "It would be more like—earning my living."

"What makes you say that?" he questioned.

"I don't know." She halted a little, confused. "I think it was something Kitty was saying this afternoon."

"Kitty Frobisher!" he said, his voice slightly contemptuous. "You don't take anything she says seriously, I hope?"

"Well, not very of course." Dona smiled a little. "I mean, I don't agree with her over everything. But—she's quite sound in some ways."

"In all matters connected with herself, no doubt," agreed Michael drily. "I think myself that it's very good of you to have anything to do with her."

Dona's eyes widened. This was quite a new point of view. "Oh, I don't think she thinks so," she said.

He laughed rather grimly. "I'm sure she doesn't. She has a very comfortable idea of her own importance. No doubt she always will have."

"She's very good-natured," said Dona with a hasty effort to find something to say in her friend's favour.

He shrugged his shoulders. "We're talking about you, aren't we? You want to earn your living as a clerk and I am inclined to give you a trial."

"Oh, are you?" said Dona, overwhelmed. "Do you think—really—I should be good enough?"

"I think you soon might be," he said; "that is, if you didn't hate the work—as I do."

This was a revelation to Dona. She looked at him in wide astonishment. "You hate it, do you? Oh, then do let me come and help! Perhaps—in time—I could do all the horrid part for you."

He smiled at that; he had a pleasant smile. "That would be very good for me, wouldn't it? And what about you? P'raps you'd hate it too!"

"Oh no, I shouldn't!" declared Dona with earnestness. "I'd simply love it—better than lessons ever so much. Couldn't we begin soon?"

She looked so young and ardent, standing there, her eyes bright with recent tears, her slender form poised as it were on the edge of eager activity, that the man's smile deepened unconsciously as he watched her.

"You'd better not be too keen," he said. "You don't know what you're letting yourself in for. You might find me a very hard taskmaster."

Dona smiled also at that. "Well, I expect that would be good for me," she said. "Mrs. Conyers would only spoil me."

"Yes, there is that," he agreed. "But I shouldn't. Joe can tell you that."

"Joe!" she said, and laughed; but the next moment she was sober again. "Yes, I should be like Joe—earning my living at the Mill. Only I shouldn't be paid of course. I should like to work for the Mill."

"Why shouldn't you be paid?" he said. "You don't suppose I'd let you do it for nothing?"

Dona started a little, and a wave of rich colour went over her upturned face imparting a vividness that made it arresting. "Oh, you couldn't pay me," she said. "I never thought of that!"

"Why not?" he said.

"Because—because it wouldn't be fair!" Rather incoherently she answered him. "You—you've done so much for me, and I've never done—anything for you yet."

"Why do you put it like that?" he said.

"Because it is like that," said Dona in some distress. "Ever since Carlo went—it's been like that. And I'm getting old enough now to make some return."

"I shouldn't like you to do that," said Michael unexpectedly. "Neither would my mother. She's much too fond of you."

Dona turned her head and looked down through the darkening wood. It was strange that in all these years no sense of obligation had troubled her. She realised that Mrs. Conyers' sheltering love had kept it at bay. And Michael's generosity also! For the first time she included him, remembering the term "charity child" which had sounded so contemptuous on Garth's lips. Garth of course was different. She knew that she was under no obligation so far as Garth was concerned.

She turned and looked back at Michael, a soft shining in her dark eyes. He did not seem so formidable as usual. The distance between them had lessened magically in the quiet wood.

"Well, you mustn't pay me anyhow till I know my job," she said. "It wouldn't be fair until I was making myself really useful."

The dusk was creeping up through the brown trunks. Michael straightened himself and prepared to move homewards. "When that happens, I must make a junior partner of you," he said.

"Oh, no!" said Dona gravely. "You'll have to marry and have a son for that."

He made an odd gesture as of protest, and then again rather briefly he laughed. "Will you be the stop-gap till then?" he asked.

And Dona, stepping before him to descend the woodland track, made serious answer: "Of course I will!"

CHAPTER VIII

BESIDE THE RIVER

THE BEGINNING of work in the office of the Mill was another milestone in Dona's life. She entered upon it with a zest that she had never brought to her lessons, and within a month she was as firmly established in Michael's office as though she had been there for years. Mrs. Conyers had demurred a little at first. It was not good for a young girl to be "mewed up". But Dona's eagerness had overruled her objections, and Michael's gruff undertaking to allow her plenty of liberty had reassured her. Michael's mother knew that when he gave an undertaking he would fulfil it; and Dona was so obviously happy over the arrangement. She was eager and quick to learn and most keenly interested in the work of the Mill. She found Michael, curt and businesslike as he was, a far more inspiring teacher than old Uncle Simon had ever been, and she conceived a great admiration for him. Until that time he had been an unknown quantity to her, kind indeed but aloof, wrapped up in his own affairs. But now those affairs had become hers also, and she was immensely proud of the fact. With earnest enthusiasm she strove to equip herself as fully as possible for her new responsibilities, even to the extent of working for hours overtime to attain proficiency on the office typewriter.

But as soon as Michael discovered this he put a stop to it. He followed her one evening after tea when she was supposed to be at leisure and came upon her in the little dingy room at the back of the Mill where all business affairs were transacted.

She was already at work when he entered and was so intent upon her task that she did not hear him. He took up his stand behind her and there remained for some minutes quietly watching.

Dona's fingers moved slowly over the keys. She was trying to work with her eyes shut, typing from memory a letter which she had written for him earlier in the day. Very patiently she plodded on, quite unconscious of the man standing behind her, her lovely girlish face upturned, flower-like in its soft curves and colouring, her red lips moving silently, spelling out the words.

Finally, coming to the end of a line, she paused and opened her eyes. And in that moment Michael spoke.

"So this is how you spend your leisure time!"

She started almost guiltily and looked up at him. "Oh, Michael, is it you? I never heard you come in."

"I know," he said. "I saw the office-key had gone and followed you."

Dona's face was deeply flushed; her eyes were deprecating. "I type so badly," she said. "I wanted to practise."

He shook his head. "You mustn't work over hours. You're too young."

"But I must get good at it," pleaded Dona. "I make so many mistakes. I'm not so very young after all. It won't hurt me."

His look met hers inexorably. "No. I won't have it," he said. "You work quite hard enough. You'll get plenty of practice by degrees. There's no sense in rushing things."

A shadow of intense disappointment crossed Dona's face. She turned from him in silence and bent over the typewriter. He watched her adjust it with fingers that trembled a little; then, as she lifted the cover, he spoke again with curt kindness.

"I can't afford to let you wear yourself out. You're getting too useful."

Dona dropped the cover again and turned. "Oh, do you really mean that?" she said.

The cloud was gone in a moment; her face was radiant. It had the arresting look of beauty newly developed—the glow of a perfect dawning.

A slight frown contracted Michael's thick brows as he regarded her—the sort of frown that might be induced by a sudden burst of sunshine. But he only said rather brusquely: "I usually mean what I say."

Dona made a little breathless sound of satisfaction and returned to the typewriter. "I'll get ever so much more useful presently," she said. "But I must practise a little sometimes."

"Not over hours," maintained Michael, stooping to clip the cover as she fitted it on. "Come on out now! We'll go along the river."

She had never walked alone with Michael before, but since her association with him in the office her awe of him had very largely departed. Not for worlds would she have done anything to merit

his displeasure even now, but she was far more at ease with him than she had ever been before, and as they went along the bank she told him of the kingfisher's nest and of the water-vole who lived on the other side of the stream.

"Wouldn't it be fun," she said, "if one could only talk to them and make them understand one wanted to be friends?"

Michael considered the matter and finally decided that there was too much talking done in the world already and that it seldom helped in that direction—a remark which Dona thought extremely practical if somewhat disappointing.

"D'you think we'd all be happier then if we couldn't talk?" she asked him.

Michael laughed a little. "I think it would be jolly good for some of us," he said. "But I don't mean you. You're not a chatterbox."

She wondered if he meant Kitty Frobisher who had been in again that day, but refrained from asking. It was nice just to saunter along in silence through the fragrant evening, stopping now and then to gather sprays of the meadow-sweet that grew at the water's edge.

She herself never walked along that path without thinking of Garth and that summer night long ago when he had inflicted condign punishment upon her and afterwards saved her life. It was not a thought that she cared to dwell upon, but the impression had remained indelible all through the intervening years, and mechanically her mind turned towards the memory as they neared the spot.

Curiously enough, almost as though some message had passed between her brain and his, Michael spoke of his half-brother as they reached it.

"I believe Garth is coming down next week-end."

"Oh, is he?" Dona started, taken by surprise and oddly discomfited. "It's—a long while, isn't it, since he was here? I suppose he wants to fish?"

"Getting late for that," said Michael. "No; what he really wants is to have a look at Everest and The Old Cottage."

"Oh!" said Dona again in still greater astonishment. "Why?"

Everest—that pleasant, low-roofed little abode that had been Simon Garrett's—had been put up for sale, but The Old Cottage at the end of the orchard in which she and Carlo had once dwelt

belonged to Michael. It had fallen into disrepair of late years, for no one seemed to want it. That Garth could take the faintest interest in the fate of either was a possibility that had never crossed her mind.

"What can he want to look at them for?" she said.

"He's prospecting," explained Michael, "for a friend—an artist patient of his who wants to recuperate in the country. He is wondering if The Old Cottage could be turned into a studio. Everest is only a few yards beyond and might do as a residence if that could be arranged."

"Wouldn't it mean a tremendous lot of alteration?" said Dona.

"That I don't know. I'm no judge of these things," said Michael. "But if it appeals to them, I've no objection to the place being altered. They'd probably have to pull down the upper storey and make a skylight. It's tumbling to pieces in any case."

"That would be a change," said Dona.

She was not sure for the moment that she liked the idea. The Old Cottage had always been associated with the thought of Carlo and the prospect of this innovation did not appeal to her. But the news of Garth's coming quickened her pulses as usual, giving a warmer tinge to life. This scheme might involve more than one visit from him. It was several months now since they had seen him.

"It'll be rather interesting, won't it?" she said. "I wonder who his artist friend is, and if he knew Carlo."

"I wonder!" said Michael rather abruptly, as though this were a notion that had not occurred to him before. He gave her a sudden keen look. "Are you anxious to know more about him?" he asked.

"Well, of course," said Dona simply. "It would be nice to know who I am, wouldn't it?"

He did not answer her, and she had a feeling that he was displeased at something, though at what she could not guess.

After a moment or two she delicately turned the subject. She was beginning to learn the best way of dealing with Michael, though the knowledge was as yet purely instinctive and scarcely conscious.

"I should like Everest to go to someone nice," she said, "shouldn't you? And perhaps he would take on poor Mrs. Dipper

and Spademoore again. I know Mrs. Dipper would like to stay."

"You'd better mention it to Garth," said Michael.

"Shall I?" questioned Dona. "Wouldn't it be better if you did?"

"Good heavens, no!" he said. "It's no concern of mine."

Dona took refuge in silence. Evidently something had upset him, and it was better to leave him alone to recover.

They walked for several yards without speaking, Michael smoking his pipe and staring moodily ahead. Then suddenly a little squeak of delight escaped Dona, and she stopped short on the grassy track, clutching his arm.

"Look—look! There goes my precious little water-vole! He's swimming straight across. Oh, wouldn't it be lovely just to run through the water like that?"

Her enthusiasm was so childish and spontaneous that Michael was practically compelled to give his sympathetic attention, however little the object of her interest might appeal to him. They stood together and watched the small creature skimming through the water until he reached the further bank.

Then, with some embarrassment, Dona became aware that she was still holding Michael's arm and swiftly removed her hand.

He looked down at her, slightly quizzical. "He's one of your friends, is he?"

She smiled rather regretfully. "Yes. Only I think I like him better than he likes me."

"That often happens," said Michael, and turned to walk on. "There's no help for it, I'm afraid. It's life."

She wondered why he spoke so sombrely, but did not like to ask, as they passed on side by side through the evening stillness beside the flowing water.

CHAPTER IX

JIM WALLIS

THOUGH secretly Dona counted the days as usual to Garth's coming, she was not so absorbed with the thought as to be unable to give her mind to the tasks in hand as in earlier days. Perhaps this was because she found her work under Michael infinitely more absorbing than her lessons, or perhaps his approbation was of more value than Uncle Simon's had ever been; or again, perhaps she was growing up and attaining more power of self-control. Whatever the reason, she was able to keep the disturbing influence well in the background and betray no signs of preoccupation.

It chanced that the Cragstone Flower Show was being held in the Park on the Saturday of his arrival. It was one of the few gala occasions in Dona's quiet life. Kitty Frobisher always looked forward to it with the keenest enthusiasm and spent weeks beforehand planning her dress as though it had been a trousseau. Dona was wont to feel a little cynical over such elaborate preparations, since, when the day arrived, there were so few spectators of any interest. And if one did not dress to impress others, why bother? But then Kitty, as she explained, was out to please the crowd, which made a difference. The crowd, as typified by the young dandies of Cragstone Village, held no sort of appeal for Dona. She liked the flowers and the band and wandering at will through the gardens which were thrown open to the public on that day. But the social part—the sweltering throng on the sports and amusement grounds with the rough jokes of the men and cackling repartees of the women—was supremely unattractive to her. She had no desire to be queen in that gathering. It had coarse elements from which she shrank instinctively. Carlo would have called it “the braying of wild asses”. It was a favourite term of his.

It was different for Kitty. She met the village people every day of her life and was intimate or haughtily the reverse with everyone. She had no fundamental shyness to contend with. She ex-

pected, and she received, a certain homage. She had her recognised place among them.

But Dona had no place. People were kind to her or ignored her exactly according to fancy, and recently a few of the young men had taken to ogling her—a form of rustic compliment which filled her with disgust and a vague alarm. Kitty only laughed and said it was because she was worth looking at, but it seemed to Dona that such evidence evinced more of disrespect than of admiration, and it always made her long to turn and flee.

On the whole, she looked forward to the *fête* with decidedly mixed feelings, and it was rather to please Mrs. Conyers than herself that she entered as usual for the Bouquet Competition with flowers from the Mill House garden. She had won a prize for this for several years running, and her artistic sense revelled in the creation of fresh colour effects, such as no village maiden would have dreamed of contriving. She had an eye for richness of hue and a taste in combining shades to obtain one dazzling and harmonious whole which to Mrs. Conyers' simple mind was almost miraculous. But then, as she would fondly say, Dona was like a flower herself, so who could wonder?

Certainly Dona's bouquet that year was the finest that she had ever made. Her chosen colours were crimson and purple shading to the palest mauves and blues and veiled in her favourite love-in-a-mist. She made it up the previous evening in the coolness of the garden at sunset, and Mrs. Conyers called Michael from the other side of the house to look at it when it was finished.

"You probably won't be bothered to go into the tent to-morrow," she said. "But you must see it. It's too lovely to miss."

Michael came, smoking his pipe, and stood gazing at Dona's bouquet in complete silence until Dona, growing anxious, said: "I don't think he likes it much."

And then he looked at her and took out his pipe with a half-smile. "Yes, I like it," he said, "because you have put yourself into it."

And with the words to her astonishment he broke off a flower of the love-in-a-mist and put it into his button-hole.

"Well, that's an honour!" declared Mrs. Conyers. "You won't get a higher compliment than that, dear, even when you've won the first prize to-morrow."

Dona flushed a little, but said nothing. It was the last thing she

had expected of him, and it disconcerted her oddly. For there was nothing trivial about him. Everything he did had a purpose behind it, and she did not feel that his aim had been merely to please her. But at least it was gratifying to know that he approved of her handiwork. His approval had begun to mean a great deal to her. She cared more about that than the winning of the first prize which was almost a foregone conclusion.

She put her flowers away into the cool cellar to await the next day, and went to bed, still feeling puzzled.

In the morning she forgot the incident in the exhilarating thought of Garth's coming. Everything was subservient to that, and even when she drove away in the pony-cart with her flowers to Cragstone Park and caught a glimpse of Michael watching from the door of the great granary, she could think of nothing else. Though Garth would probably not arrive before evening the prospect of his advent filled her with an overwhelming sense of anticipation that yet was not wholly pleasurable. It was always the same with her—a mixture of dread blending with though scarcely marring her delight. He was the one person before all others who seemed to have the right of mastery over her, though to him she might well be no more than the eager slave to be summoned or dismissed by a flick of the fingers. Like Cæsar, he might oppress or treat her as negligible; but she would still be there to fulfil his royal behest. Like Cæsar also, he might raise her to the seventh heaven by his kindness though he had never yet done so; but she would still be at his feet.

Why this should be so she had never stopped to ask herself. He had established his ascendancy over her long ago, and nothing had ever happened to alter it. Garth was Garth, and so long as he was in the vicinity everything centred upon him, and nothing else was of any real importance. Only when he was gone could life be expected to assume its normal proportions again, but she never looked beyond the fact of his coming and actual presence. The future held no interest when he was there.

And so all the way to Cragstone Park her thoughts dwelt upon him. He would motor down in his two-seater car, and he would not arrive before seven; but, however long the day might be the evening would come at last and he with it.

She found her way to the Flower Show tents, and her bouquet was placed with the rest to be judged. Then at the suggestion of

a fellow-competitor she wandered round among the flowers that were being arranged on the stands, filling her senses with the colour and fragrance of them till she felt almost intoxicated and as if she could sing and dance because life held such lovely things.

There was no need to hurry back, for Michael had dispensed with her help that morning, and the office and Mill closed at one. It was a complete holiday, and she needed only to be back in time to dress and partake of the midday meal. So, blissfully, she sauntered about among the flowers, exchanging a few greetings with people whom she knew, but for the most part revelling silently in the beauty that so deeply appealed to her.

She was thus engaged when Kitty arrived on the scene and began rather fussily to unpack some flowers and mats and vases for table decoration. She called to Dona as soon as she caught sight of her.

"Do come and help me! I'm in such a hurry," she said. "I've got some things I want to take to the Industrial Section. You might get some water for these glasses while I'm gone and start arranging the foliage for me. There's Jim Wallis over there. He's got a can."

Dona had already observed Jim Wallis's presence and had been keeping out of his way. He was something of a rose-fancier, and had brought some fine specimens for competition. But Kitty's behests must be fulfilled at all times, so, reluctantly, she crossed the tent and approached him.

Jim Wallis was a young man of twenty-five, and there was no doubt that he possessed considerable attractions from a rustic point of view. He was of average height and fairly athletic build, and he was good-looking in a low-comedian kind of way. His features were of a Punch-like type, and he possessed a pair of bold black eyes that had a wicked habit of turning into gleaming slits when he laughed. His laughter was frequent and uproarious, and he was regarded as a distinct acquisition to any party.

Dona's aversion was quite singular. All the village girls looked upon him as a sort of Lothario whose favours were worth competing for, and he was the object of a good deal of rivalry in consequence. He was standing talking to one of the gardeners of Cragstone Park when Dona reached him, and she made a swift effort to obtain the can without fully distracting his attention.

"Could I borrow this for a second? I only want a little," she said.

But Jim immediately closed his conversation with the Cragstone gardener and turned to greet her.

"Hullo, Miss Celestis! Haven't seen you for weeks. What is it you're wanting? Water? Heavens, yes! Any amount of it. I'll carry it for you."

"Please don't!" urged Dona, trying to take the can from him, but he would not be denied.

"Yes—yes, rather. Give me the honour, what? I say, are you going to be here to-night? There's dancing, you know—and fireworks."

"No, I don't suppose so," said Dona with a rapid memory of Garth. "Please don't you worry! I'll bring it back."

"Don't be silly!" he said. "It's much too heavy for you. Why aren't you coming to-night? Won't they let you?"

"Of course they would—if I wanted to!" Dona was indignant; somehow Jim Wallis always contrived to put her on the defensive.

He laughed now on a slightly scoffing note. "Ho! Too grand, are we? Well, if you take my advice you'll make the best of what you can get. Life is short, and there's not too much fun knocking about as a rule."

She did not like either words or laughter, but she was not of an argumentative nature, and it was easier to let them pass.

He came to Kitty's table and filled up the glasses, but then, instead of departing as she hoped he would, he established himself for further conversation while she unpacked the basket.

"I hear they've turned you into a Mill girl. What d'you have to do? Is it hard work?"

Dona, working at feverish speed, replied that it was nothing but writing and accounts and she enjoyed it.

Jim Wallis lighted a cigarette and lodged himself against a corner of the table to watch her.

"Well, I suppose it's good practice," he said. "If you get tired of the job, you can come along to us. My old guv'nor's getting past work, and he gets the books into a fine muddle sometimes. Says himself he's got no head left for figures."

Dona, not knowing in the least whether he were in earnest or not, thanked him briefly in a tone of refusal.

"There you go!" he said. "Turning a thing down before you know what it means! Well, no matter!" He laughed boisterously. "We'll come to an understanding one of these days."

Dona made no response. She was working mechanically, merely because it was easier to work than to stand passive. She wished earnestly that Kitty would return, but she was nowhere within sight. It did not occur to her to go in search of her. And so, almost without knowing it, she began to arrange Kitty's table, while Jim Wallis stood by and made what he considered suitable conversation.

It was almost a soliloquy, for her replies were of the scantiest. She hated the feeling of his eyes upon her, and refused resolutely to raise her own to meet them. When eventually he moved nearer and began with jocular comments to hand her the flowers, she picked up the basket and set it on the other side of the table.

He professed to take offence at this. "We're very high and mighty this morning. What's it all about?"

Dona pretended not to hear. As a matter of fact, the work she had engaged upon in self-defence was beginning to absorb her attention, and Jim's presence was fading into a vaguely irritating background. She did not like him, but when once her mind had concentrated itself upon anything artistic, other matters became of correspondingly less importance. He might criticise, protest, or gibe, but she hardly heeded him. Her whole being was centred upon the disposal of Kitty's sweet-peas to the very best advantage, and she did not look up or speak until a sudden marked silence gave her warning.

Then for an instant she detached herself from her task and glanced up to find Jim Wallis no longer lounging but fully erect and staring straight at her in a fashion which sent a sharp sense of recoil through her. She met his look with a start; it seemed to pierce her. But in a moment it was withdrawn. He swung on his heel and left her, while the hot colour surged up over Dona's face and neck as though she had been caught in a fault.

He was angry, that was evident; and she had not meant to anger him. She did not like hostility, and that look of his had disturbed her to the depths, so that she wanted to hide her head till the consuming flame of embarrassment had died down. Why had he looked at her like that? Simply because she had not responded to his banter? Impossible to say! She did not under-

stand men, and this first dawning of knowledge filled her with a strange sense of shame.

She tried to return to the business in hand, but her fingers were trembling too much, and she was immeasurably relieved to hear Kitty's chattering voice approaching from the other direction.

"Oh, Dona! Well, I declare! Now that is good of you! My dear, what a show you've made! I can't think how you do it."

"It isn't finished," Dona hastened to say. "I hope I haven't done too much. You can pull it to pieces again of course. I was only playing with it till you came."

"Pull it to pieces indeed! I don't see myself doing that," declared Kitty. "Why it's sheer magic. I've never seen anything like it. I suppose I'd better just put the finishing touches, though it doesn't look as if it wanted anything. I shall get first prize for this, you'll see."

"Oh, I hope you will," said Dona.

Kitty's approbation served to restore her self-confidence, and she availed herself of it gratefully. Jim Wallis had left the tent, and she felt as if a weight had been lifted from her. Gladly she lingered to give Kitty ideas for the completion of her scheme, and when she finally turned homewards the cloud had passed from her spirit and her heart seemed to be singing again. Only the afternoon now intervened before the coming of Garth.

CHAPTER X

PAN'S POOL

DONA'S dress for the afternoon's festivities was a very simple one. She had made it herself under Mrs. Conyers' loving supervision. It was of palest pink muslin, and she wore with it a black straw hat which she had chosen against Mrs. Conyers' judgment but which her own instinct had told her was the most becoming background for her golden hair. A single deep pink rose adorned the hat, and though she did not know it, Dona could have walked into a London gathering and attracted only favourable comment. For her beauty was of a type that could not pass unnoticed anywhere, and the plainness of her attire only served to enhance it. Also, quite unconsciously, she bore herself like a princess. There was nothing of the rustic *belle* about her. There never had been.

Mrs. Conyers was very proud of her. She hung behind as they entered the big marquee to catch the admiring looks that followed her darling. She had always known that Dona would far outshine the girls of the village, and though the conviction sometimes caused her some anxiety she loved to note the silent homage which her beauty evoked on the rare occasions when the outside world saw her.

Dona herself was in a flutter of excitement, but not so much on account of the crowds. It was the band that excited her. She seldom heard music other than that of the droning organ in the village church, and it stirred her in a fashion that she hardly understood, especially in conjunction with the sight and scent of the flowers. It transported her back to the dream-palace of her childhood—the marble pillars—and the blue, blue sea. . . .

The Flower Show had been duly opened by old Lady Fontleigh of Cragstone Park when they arrived, as she had opened it for the past fifty years, and she herself was making a tour of the tents with her son, Colonel Fontleigh—an ex-Guardsman, and his wife—a tall, graceful woman, exquisitely dressed. They passed Dona, standing rapt by one of the entrances with the full glory of the

summer sunshine pouring down upon her, and Lady Fontleigh stopped short and put up her glasses as though she had suddenly discovered some rare floral specimen.

Dona did not even see her. She was far away in that land where even the memory of Carlo did not penetrate, drifting like a disembodied spirit among nebulous imaginings.

Lady Fontleigh gazed her fill and passed on. "Where does that lovely little creature come from?" she asked of Mrs. Panton, the village schoolmistress, who was hovering near.

Mrs. Panton, who had always resented the fact of Dona being educated outside her jurisdiction, replied rather grimly: "I believe she belongs to the Mill people, my lady. I really don't know her name."

"Well, it's to be hoped they'll look after her," was Lady Fontleigh's comment as she swept away. "She's much too pretty for this wicked world."

She had seen Dona before, had even presented her with a prize the previous year; but Dona had then been a child. Now she was a child no longer. She had developed amazingly and so swiftly that she herself was sometimes half afraid of the change.

It was Mrs. Conyers who discovered that she had again won the first prize for the bouquet competition. "And would you believe it?" she added. "Kitty Frobisher is first for table decoration!"

"Oh, I'm glad!" said Dona impulsively. "Where is she? Have you seen her?"

She went in search of Kitty, and found her at length at the coco-nut shy with a small crowd of young men. Kitty was a good shot, and had already placed three coco-nuts to her credit. She hailed Dona with enthusiasm. "Come along, my dear! You have a try! See what I've won! They say they won't give me the ladies' handicap any longer."

Dona was too shy to acquit herself well in this respect. Moreover, Jim Wallis was one of the onlookers, and her immediate idea was to escape from his vicinity as swiftly as possible. But Kitty would not let her go. Flushed with triumph and eager to excel in the eyes of her admirers, she insisted upon Dona remaining to act as a foil to her own brilliance, and the game was continued until there were no more pennies forthcoming from the spectators.

Then, laughing, Kitty thrust her arm through Dona's and

turned to seek other distractions, magnificently leaving her spoils on the field.

"Isn't Michael here?" was her first question when they were out of earshot.

"Oh, no," said Dona. "Only Mrs. Conyers."

Kitty made a face. "Bother! Why didn't you persuade him?"

Such a course had not even suggested itself to Dona. She explained that she thought he was busy and that Garth was expected.

"Garth!" echoed Kitty. "I wonder he lets you call him that. You mean Dr. Repton, don't you?"

"Everyone calls him Garth at the Mill," said Dona.

"Of course his relations do," said Kitty. "But you!"

"Well, why don't you call Michael Mr. Conyers?" said Dona, goaded to self-defence.

"I do to his face," said Kitty. "But he's very different. He's just a miller. But Dr. Repton is a distinguished man. I often wonder you don't go in for him, my dear. It would be a very good thing for you and would give you the standing you need."

Dona gazed at her in shocked amazement. Such a possibility had never crossed her mind.

Kitty laughed at her simplicity. "You're such a child," she said. "You never think of things for yourself. Well, there's an idea for you. I make you a present of it. He'd suit you much better than Michael, so take my advice and leave Michael alone!"

"Oh, stop!" Dona cried in sudden anger. "How can you talk like that? It's—it's disgusting!"

"Dear, dear!" scoffed Kitty. "Because you're such a little goose yourself, you expect everyone else to be the same, do you? Well, I can tell you, they're not. I can't think of anyone of your age that's so childish and ignorant. I wouldn't be you for a thousand pounds."

She looked at Dona from the sophisticated heights of her own experience with a smile which was not lacking in good nature notwithstanding her annoyance. And Dona capitulated. For somehow it seemed to her that Kitty must know best. She saw so much more of the world.

"Well, come and see the flowers!" she said. "D'you know you're first for table decoration? Isn't it fine?"

"Very fine," said Kitty complacently. "I thought I should be

somehow. I hope they'll give me something decent. Have you got the bouquet prize again? They really ought not to let you compete every year. It's hardly fair."

Dona laughed. "I daresay someone will beat me next year. It's the only thing I went in for anyhow. How did you get on with your jam?"

Kitty had only been highly commended in this respect and was inclined to think that there was some favouritism in the judging. But she had not much time for complaint as the sports were beginning and she had entered for several events.

Dona was not wholly sorry when they separated. Kitty usually managed to make her feel inferior. She watched her flash away in her pale green satin, looking somewhat like a gaudy dragon-fly, and then bethought herself of the cool quiet gardens where no one would yet be wandering.

She remembered an exquisite tall fountain that fell into a marble basin and wondered whether she could betake herself thither without being missed. Mrs. Conyers would be going round the tents and would doubtless meet a variety of acquaintances who would make her pilgrimage a lengthy one. It did not seem to Dona that her presence was required, and the flowers held no further appeal to her in that crowd. It was only in the early morning with the dew upon them that they had drawn her. When they were all classified and appraised, they attracted her no more.

She made her retreat with a certain wariness, for she did not want to be caught and detained. Even the band at close quarters was beginning to lose its charm. The thought of the fountain lured her strongly. It was in a sylvan glade apart from the rest of the pleasure-grounds—a fairy spot where surely the elves and gnomes frolicked together by moonlight. She wanted to stamp the place upon her memory, and perhaps some day to make a picture of it—such a picture as even Carlo would not have smiled at. She had not made many pictures lately, and a strange longing was beginning to possess her to try her skill again—to create something which she would not desire to hide.

Quietly she slipped away from the heat and the noise and began to traverse a sunny stretch of parkland that lay between her and her dream. Subtly and enchantingly the dream unfolded itself as she went. It was a perfect summer day, and the ground under her feet was warm. Lightly she trod it, quickening her pace with

every step, until, like a winged fairy creature herself, she flitted into the shade of tall beech-trees which seemed to spread out their wide branches to welcome her.

She was right. No one had yet begun to wander in this direction. The Show had been open little more than an hour and the sports were for the present the main attraction. She hoped she had not been observed crossing that sun-bathed belt of grass, but even had anyone seen her she could not imagine that her example would be regarded as worth following. Everyone except herself seemed to prefer crowds and noise.

Eagerly now she made her way through the beech-wood. The green dimness was interspersed with great splashes of sunlight. The smooth straight trunks were like the pillars of some mighty temple. A quiver of sheer delight went through her. It was fairy-land indeed. She looked through the arching trees for something wonderful—a prince maybe—like Carlo.

Dear Carlo! Her thoughts clustered tenderly about him for a space. She saw his golden hair and quizzical blue eyes, and the little pointed golden beard which had somehow made him different from anyone else she had ever known. She saw his long thin hands and sensitive, wonderful fingers stained with nicotine. How often she had watched those fingers at work, transposing just such a woodland scene as this to paper or canvas, moving with such lightning rapidity, such sure undeviating craftsmanship. His pictures had been pure joy to her; she wished they had given him more pleasure.

Almost in the centre of the wood there was a tiny dell, and it was here that the fountain splashed. She heard the music of it ere she came within sight of its silver curve. And then down in its green hollow, like a jewel nestling in velvet, she saw it and stopped with caught breath.

The place was deserted as she had hoped. It was in fact so screened by the surrounding trees that few who did not know its whereabouts would be likely to find it. To Dona it was the acme of all desire, and the sight of the water shooting straight upwards into the sunlight and falling in a shower of gleaming spray back into the crystal pool below sent such a rapture of delight through her that she was conscious of a sudden aching sensation at the throat which was almost like a rush of tears. If only Carlo could have seen this! How he would have loved it!

Softly at length she moved forward. Thick moss was underfoot, muffling all sound. From behind her there came a slight rustling as though an animal moved in the undergrowth, but she heard only the tinkle of the fountain as she went lightly down from the sheltering trees behind her to the edge of the magic pool.

She reached it and stood fascinated gazing upwards. The water rose to a height of thirty feet ere it fell in a thousand sparkles, scattering into mist where an eddy of air caught it and sprinkling her face. Impulsively she took off her hat to feel the drifting moisture on her forehead. This place of enchantment was even more beautiful than her dream, and she longed to see it by moonlight. Even then, with the golden sunlight streaming down, the spell was strong upon her. She almost listened for the shrilling of fairy pipes over the mossy earth.

So wholly did her mood absorb her, she scarcely knew how long she stood rapt and expectant on the edge of the pool. The lilies at her feet and the spraying water as it fell among them seemed to have drawn her into a magic circle in which the outer world had no part. In the centre of the pool was a small statue of Pan the goat-hoofed which reminded her vaguely of Carlo. He held a reed in his mouth through which now and then a tiny second fountain shot upwards, and this was a thing which intrigued her strangely, for it imparted a curious impression of movement to the fantastic figure. She felt as if at any moment he might rise from his pedestal and walk across the floating lily-leaves to ask what she was doing there. And if she were very polite and managed not to offend him, perhaps he would take her back with him to his home under the fountain and show her wonderful things.

But minutes passed and he did not make any gesture towards her, and so at length, growing a little weary, she dropped down on the stone edge of the pool, her bent head shining in the sunlight like living gold. The heat of the afternoon was making her drowsy. She rested her chin on her hand with a delicious feeling of rest. Pan might do as he liked. So long as he did not challenge her right to be there, she was content.

It was a very small thing that aroused her, only a more pronounced splash than usual, as though a pebble had been flung from Pan's pipe instead of the periodical jet of water. It might have been Pan himself stepping off his pedestal.

She looked up with a start.

For a second the sunshine dazzled her, then with a sharp sense of expediency she summoned her wandering faculties and sprang to her feet.

Someone had come down the mossy slope from the beech-wood. A man stood facing her. With a start of dismay she recognised him—Jim Wallis.

"Ha-ha!" he said. "Tracked you at last, have I? What a romantic meeting-place!"

Jaunty as was his tone, his look somehow betrayed him. The conviction flashed across Dona that he had followed her from the outset and had been watching her ever since her arrival at the fountain's edge.

She cast a swift look around. Then in a tone that was not without dignity she made reply. "I came here some time ago—to get cool. I'm just going back again."

She stooped to pick up her hat with the words; but when she would have put it on her head he stopped her, laying a hand on her arm with a jovial air of authority.

"Oh, nonsense! You're looking so charming without it. And why hurry away? Not on my account, I hope?"

Dona snatched herself free as though his touch held contamination. There was something about him—a confidence—an air of possession—which sent a hot wave of anger through her. She resented his presence as a creature of the wild resents the presence of the hunter.

"I'm going because I want to go," she said briefly and turned away to fulfil her purpose.

But she had not taken two steps before he was beside her, still jocose though not quite so cool as before.

"A bit on the high and mighty side, aren't you?" he said. "What's your hurry?"

She could scarcely have told him had she desired to do so. She only knew that her whole being was aflame with the desire to escape, and she quickened her pace up the slope to what was almost the speed of flight. He kept beside her however, refusing to be left behind.

"No time to be lost evidently!" he commented. "Well, I'm inclined to agree with you. When you've made up your mind to a thing, it's best done quickly, eh?"

Dona was panting for breath. She hated his close proximity as

she did not remember having hated anything before. A reptile in her path would have been almost preferable.

She refused to slacken her pace, and Jim Wallis laughed aloud.

"Go it!" he scoffed. "I've got you on the leash all right. You won't get very far, my pretty."

She swerved round at that. The words held an indescribable threat that could not be ignored. Fear and anger blazed up together in a wild turmoil of rebellion. She faced him quivering, aflame.

"What do you mean?" she demanded. "How dare you come with me like this? Go—go! I don't want you!"

He stood planted squarely before her, unabashed, scoffing, refusing to take her seriously. "Oh, you don't want me, eh? Think I'm not good enough, is that it? Well, you've got a sauce, haven't you? Just because you chance to be a good-looker?"

"You—cad!" burst from Dona in open fury. "How dare you? How dare you?"

"Oh, it isn't a question of daring," he told her, still laughing with eyes half-shut. "It's just—opportunity, that's all. I'm going to give you something to remember me by, see? Just to show you what I dare do!"

He made a sudden move towards her with the words, but she sprang backwards in the same instant, and the next she was running, running down the slope again at a speed that was like the flight of a bird.

Jim Wallis gaped for a moment in astonishment and then with a whoop of derision he was after her in hot pursuit. He had scarcely expected so spirited a resistance and it certainly added zest to the chase since capture was inevitable. Fleet though she was, he knew that he could tire her out in that hollow, and if she attempted to escape up the slope she would be at his mercy immediately.

Dona also realised this last fact, but what she had not counted upon was the tirelessness of her pursuer. She had thought that he would give up the contest when he saw her on the further side of the pool, and when he proceeded without a second's hesitation to run her down she knew that her chance was small. Already excitement had robbed her of some of her strength; but she summoned every ounce to serve her need. It was possible—just possible—that he might be the first to tire.

Round and round the pool they ran, and at first he did not gain upon her. She heard his mocking laugh no more, and she hoped with all her soul that his energy and enthusiasm were alike flagging. But very soon despair took the place of hope, for she saw that he had dropped into the jog-trot of the practised runner, and though she might out-distance him without difficulty for a time, reason told her that in the end endurance and not speed would be the deciding factor.

As this knowledge dawned upon her, she cast about her frantically for some other means of eluding him, and eventually in desperation, while her strength remained, she took the very step upon which he had counted when he decided upon his own tactics. Like a moth imprisoned in a cup, she made a sudden swoop up the side for liberty. Instantly the man quickened his pace. He had plenty of reserve left. In ten seconds he was on the ascent behind her.

She heard him coming and made a desperate last effort to reach the shelter of the trees above. But she was nearer to exhaustion than she knew. The slope was steep, and her knees were failing. Unexpectedly she came upon a moss-covered molehill, and there, stumbling irretrievably, fell prone and defenceless. The next thing she knew was the rough grip of her conqueror as he snatched her up into his arms, and his hateful laughter as he covered her shrinking face with horrible, hot-breathing kisses. In all her life she had known no experience so loathsome, so full of revolting revelation, as that moment of her capture.

With all her remaining strength she fought him, striking with her fists at his grinning, triumphant face the instant he lifted it. But he only laughed at her anew and plunged it downwards again like an animal gorging its prey.

She still struggled for a space but with waning powers. The long flight had worn her out, and his mastery was unsparing and brutal. The next time he lifted his head to gloat over his prize she lay crushed and passive in his hold.

"Well," he giped, "you played for it, my lady, and you've got it. P'raps it'll teach you to be a bit more civil next time."

Her lips quivered and she shut her eyes. She could neither move nor speak.

He held her limp body pressed to his. "Thought you'd score

off me, did you?" he jeered. "You—a girl with a fancy-dress name that's been brought up on charity!"

A shiver went through her at the word, but she gave no other sign that she heard. He laughed more subtly above her pale drawn face. "Little fool!" he said. "I've had my eye on you for a long time, and you'll be glad to marry me yet."

That sent the wild blood beating up again to her face. A spasm of returning life went through her. She opened her eyes upon his red exulting countenance and set her hands against his chest, forcing him from her. "You beast!" she gasped. "You—vile beast!"

"Quite so!" said a voice behind her. "What the devil does he think he's doing, I wonder? Let me have him and give him a bit of training!"

The words—the tone—went through Dona like an electric thrill. She uttered a cry that was half of relief and half of lingering anguish, and then she was free—save that Garth's hands were upon her, placing her steadily down on the thick moss, seeming to curb and sustain her in the same moment.

"You sit there!" he said in his quiet leisured way. "And I'll give you an exhibition in the training of beasts which I think you ought to enjoy."

CHAPTER XI

GARTH

DONA felt a little dazed as she sat there, gazing downwards. The sudden coming of Garth had caused such a conflict of emotions within her that for the first few moments she hardly knew what she was doing. Though he was swift to remove the scene of battle from her immediate vicinity, she felt for a space as though it were still raging over her, and she sat all caught together in a huddle like a small animal paralysed by fright. It was thus that she saw Garth, gripping Jim Wallis by the neck as though he had been a dog and running him irresistibly down the slope to the edge of the pool. And when they arrived there, by some trick of wrestling which she could not follow, he bent the young man double until his head met the spraying water. After that, he grimly held him until Jim Wallis's limbs gave with the strain and he fell literally face downwards into the pool.

The turmoil that ensued was such as to blur all detail, but Dona gathered that Garth's grip had not relaxed and that he continued to hold Jim Wallis under with deliberation and precision until such time as he judged that a further immersion was inadvisable. Then, with the utmost coolness, he released him and suffered him to scramble back on to dry land.

It was a somewhat weak scramble, rather like the blind efforts of a half-drowned puppy, and Dona was horribly reminded of something which had once happened to herself. As that memory came upon her, her own desire to escape revived overwhelmingly. She sat up and found that her strength had returned. A moment later she was fleeing up the slope at a speed which rapidly brought her into the welcome shelter of the beech-wood, and when once that was reached, she slipped into the shadows and drew a deep breath of relief. She was safe at last.

Mechanically she had snatched up her hat, and half-mechanically now she stopped and began to straighten its bent brim, her fingers still a-quiver with agitation. Her face felt on fire, but the rest of her seemed cold, as though an icy draught enveloped her.

Her heart was beating in great thuds that threatened to choke her, and her nerves were still keyed up almost to snapping point. If either of the two men below had come upon her then, her self-control would have gone and she would have shrieked in sheer agony of spirit.

But luckily for her, her retreat had been unobserved, and the solitude remained unbroken. So she drifted through the wood with trembling knees till a fallen tree invited her; and then, sobbing a little, she sank down among the screening branches and lay inert, wrapped in a comforting peace which the droning of a million insects served only to intensify.

It was a full quarter of an hour later that her natural activity asserted itself, and she sat up in her nest of leaves and began to contemplate a return to the tents. Mrs. Conyers must be missing her and wondering where she was. Garth would know of course, but he might not have returned either, and in any case she had a feeling that he probably would not mention having seen her. Her face burned afresh at the thought of those horrible kisses which he must have witnessed before arriving to her rescue. She felt degraded—as though she would rather run anywhere than meet his look. But quieter reflection brought to her a certain odd solace. Garth was Garth. He had seen her in undignified circumstances before. She could not well be cheapened in his eyes. She had always been of such small account with him. His presence was something of a surprise to her when she came to think of it. She could not picture him taking the faintest interest in the Flower Show.

She got to her feet and began to straighten her crumpled dress. She feared to find it in tatters, but it seemed to have escaped serious injury. She pushed back the golden ripples of her hair and put on her hat. Then she paused and looked around her.

How peaceful it was—how perfect the calm! A great longing surged within her to cast aside all thought of return to the seething tents, and remain where she was until darkness came and she could go home unnoticed. The horror and the shame still tortured her, and the vile memory of the arms that had held her against her will flickered like a searing flame through her consciousness. She closed her teeth upon her lower lip. Why had he chosen her? Why not have followed Kitty? Kitty would not have cared. She would only have laughed.

The voice of a wood-pigeon began to talk softly through the stillness, soothing her, persuading her. After all, why need she go back? There was no urgency in the matter. Garth would take care of Mrs. Conyers. She could turn now, if she chose, and walk home to Michael. He would not worry her with questions. She would tell him that she was tired and hot, and that Garth was with his mother. Yes, that was what she would do. She would go home to Michael. The thought of him, his quiet acceptance of her, his brusque but never-varying courtesy, spread balm over her troubled soul. Yes, she would go home to Michael.

The wood-pigeon ceased to talk somewhat abruptly and left its tree with a clap of wings. She started and turned to watch its flight. And then with a sharp catch of the breath she went back a step with the half-formed idea of burrowing afresh into the shelter which she had just quitted. For there, within a dozen yards of her, calm and collected, watching her with a slightly supercilious expression, stood Garth.

He spoke at once with cool self-possession that seemed to rebuke her agitation. "Well, so here you are! None the worse, I hope?"

She stood before him like a child expecting censure, but no words would come. Her embarrassment was like a consuming flame. She was thankful for the shady hat that protected her face from his deliberate scrutiny.

Without haste he crossed the intervening space and reached her. "Well?" he said again.

She locked her hands together in an unconscious attitude of pleading. "Wasn't it—horrible?" she said, forcing herself to speak.

He uttered a short amused laugh. "Who for? You or the gallant swain? I think we've cooled his ardour pretty effectively. He'll need to dry his wings before he attempts any further airy flights."

Dona could not laugh. She was too filled with discomfiture and loathing. "Thank you—for what you did," she said in a low voice.

He laughed again with easy nonchalance. "I'm glad to know I wasn't in the way anyhow. What do we do now? Return to the merry-go-rounds?"

"No!" said Dona with emphasis. "I'd—hate to go back!"

He raised his brows. "Even under my escort? I think we may

wash out the possibility of meeting the young man there again."

She was swift to realise that for some reason he wished her to return in his company, and that fact swayed her instantly. "We'll go back then," she said. "Mrs. Conyers is there. She'll be wondering, won't she?"

"Yes, she is wondering," said Garth. "As a matter of fact, that was why I came to look for you."

She burned anew at his careless explanation. So that was what had brought him thither! "What shall I say to her?" she said rather piteously.

"Does it matter?" said Garth.

She shrank at the question. "I couldn't tell her. I couldn't tell anyone."

"Why not?" he said.

She did not answer. There was something in this inquisition that hurt her intolerably. She wished with sudden passion that she had escaped and gone home without waiting to be discovered.

"Why not?" he said again, and then to her dismay he took her by the shoulder as though she had been a child, and turned her downcast face up to meet his calm, impersonal scrutiny. "What's the trouble?" he said. "I suppose you'd been leading the young man on."

She recoiled with a vehement gesture of repudiation. There were some things that could not be endured—even from Garth. "Never! No—never!" she said. "I hate him—and he knows it!"

"Oh, is that it?" said Garth. He held her still; in fact, he employed a certain quiet compulsion to draw her back into focus. "How long has he known it, I wonder?"

She opened her lips in hot protest, but suddenly closed them again; for there was that in her—outraged pride or newly-awakened womanhood—that made protest seem contemptible. She stood in quivering silence.

Garth's grey eyes continued to scan her unsparingly. She thought they held derision. "Well?" he said. "Is that question also ruled out of order?"

Something within her that yet did not seem to be a part of herself gave her strength to reply. "You wouldn't ask it if you didn't know the answer."

He looked momentarily surprised, and a queer gleam came into his look that she had not expected to see. A second later, still

quite coolly, he set her free. "After that rebuff," he said, "I will ask no more. Shall we go back?"

She turned in silence to comply.

He paused to light a cigarette, and, obedient to the old sense of subjugation, she waited for him—but with a difference. There was no suggestion of servility in her attitude. When he joined her, they walked back side by side to the track between the trees that led over the slope to the open parkland.

Garth was in no hurry. He sauntered along with the easy self-assurance of a man enjoying a well-earned holiday, and Dona was compelled to accept his pace, though it seemed to her almost exasperatingly slow. She could not have described her state of mind at that moment. To be angry with Garth was unthinkable, but she felt desperately hot and uncomfortable—as though she had been coolly slid under a microscope for close professional investigation, and from the bottom of her soul she resented it. But her examiner was so completely aloof and self-contained that any attempt at rebellion or even self-defence was out of the question. She could only wait in dumb endurance until his whim should be satisfied.

They were well within sight of the open sky at the end of the wood ere with a certain condescension he spoke again. "I suppose you have no objection to returning in my company?"

She looked at him in quick astonishment. "Of course not! Why?"

"I merely wondered," he said, "as you seemed to be somewhat ultra-sensitive."

It flashed upon her that she had offended him—Garth of all people—at whose feet she had lain, as it were a humble door-mat, for the past five years. A throb of consternation went through her. For the moment she was staggered at the bare idea.

"Oh, please!" she said. "Please! I never meant—that!"

He smiled faintly, but without sympathy. "It's a pity," he said, "that you should start any airs of that sort, because—candidly—they spoil the whole effect, which is otherwise quite pleasing."

Airs! Somehow that cut her unbearably. She turned to him with outstretched hands almost before she knew it. "Oh, please!" she said again in open entreaty. "Don't say that! You mustn't say that. It isn't fair."

He took her hands and patted them together with kindly superiority. "You silly little thing!" he said. "What is there to be upset about? You're getting too pretty, that's your trouble. But you mustn't get uppish as well—not with me anyway—or I shall have to take you down a peg, as I did once before."

Her lips quivered. "You know you can do anything," she said piteously. "I wouldn't offend you for the world."

"Really!" said Garth. "Well, that's something worth knowing anyhow." He spoke chaffingly, but there was an undercurrent of seriousness in his voice. "I'm privileged, am I? All right then. We'll say no more. For goodness sake, don't cry, child! Pull yourself together and be sensible!" And Dona walked humbly by his side, feeling thankful and at the same time vaguely distressed—like a slave whose master's displeasure had been unwittingly incurred and to whom an unmerited clemency had been extended.

CHAPTER XII

RUMOUR

THEY found Mrs. Conyers on the outskirts of the sports ground, beginning to be really anxious regarding Dona's prolonged absence. But a few careless words from Garth reassured her. Dona had gone in search of the fountain and lost her sense of direction. He had found her in the beech-wood. Children of her age ought not to be let out alone.

Dona said nothing beyond a murmured acquiescence to these half-bantering remarks, and when Garth observed with a shrug that he thought the tea-tent offered greater attractions than these village antics she turned from the crowd with relief.

Tea, under Garth's auspices, helped to restore her balance, and before it was over she had begun to forget the acute discomfiture of the past hour. Jim Wallis was nowhere to be seen, and the corner chosen by Garth was a fairly secluded one. She listened to his casual talk to his mother regarding Everest and The Old Cottage with returning confidence, and ere the meal was over she felt almost herself again.

The tent was beginning to become crowded ere Garth proposed a move. He led the way out between the tables with the air of a man to whom the chattering throng was on the same sort of level as a swarm of buzzing insects, and Dona, following with Mrs. Conyers, regarded him with renewed respect and a certain dawning feeling of exultation. She had never before dreamed that he could possibly think her pretty. That sentence of his, grimly qualified though it had been, filled her with a tremulous delight now that she had time to remember it. He had never given her one word of approbation before, and she had always imagined his standard of comeliness to be far beyond her reach. But he had called her pretty—"too pretty" had been his expression—and by the very disparagement of the term she knew that he had meant it.

Greatly to her surprise, he expressed his intention of seeing her flowers before the prize-giving which was almost due. There

was not such a crush of people in the Flower Tent, and she went with him, quaking a little inwardly, yet eager for his verdict. Remembering what Michael's had been she scarcely looked for any enthusiasm, but even a hint of praise from Garth was worth having.

But when he saw her bouquet he turned to her with genuine astonishment in his eyes. "You didn't do that!" he said.

"Indeed she did!" declared Mrs. Conyers with pride. "I helped her cut the flowers, didn't I, Dona?"

Garth turned back. "You're an artist!" he said.

And Dona glowed to the very soul of her—as she had not glowed at Michael's praise. She had expected patronage from Garth, not open admiration.

He said no more, but passed on, his eye caught by the table-decorations close by. "Have you done any of these?" he asked. "Ah!"—pausing abruptly—"that's your work, I'll swear!"

He had stopped at Kitty Frobisher's table which was also marked with a First Prize ticket.

"Oh no!" Dona said hastily. "That's Kitty's."

"Kitty! Who's Kitty?" He looked at her, and Dona turned hotly crimson. "You've had more than a hand in this," he said with conviction. Dona never knew afterwards whether it was chance or design that brought Kitty, frothily explanatory, to join them at that moment.

"Oh, Dr. Repton! Are you looking at my flowers? What an honour! And the poor flowers are getting so faded in this heat. It doesn't give one a chance, does it? But I'm glad you like them."

Garth turned his eyes slowly from Dona's embarrassed countenance to Kitty's pink and white smiling one, and formally raised his hat. "How do you do?" he said vaguely. "Your table, is it? I thought it was Dona's."

"Dona!" Kitty turned on her with reproach. "You couldn't—surely—claim any credit just for putting water in the vases!"

"I didn't!" protested Dona. "I didn't! I was just saying it was your table. It is your table, and nothing whatever to do with me!"

Her vehemence was almost fiery; she was actually trembling with agitation, while Kitty stood, puffed with indignation, confronting her.

Mrs. Conyers began a pacific: "There, there, my dear, I'm sure that's enough for anyone," which would probably have gained its end, when Garth interrupted with a cool laugh of such complete scepticism that her kindly purpose was defeated.

"I assure you——" exclaimed Kitty with outraged emphasis.

But Garth merely laughed the more with exasperating amusement. "I shall compete next time," he said, "and Dona shall—fill my vases for me."

And with that, still laughing, he sauntered on, easy and assured, leaving a very ruffled Kitty behind him.

Dona hesitated for a moment with the idea of placating her friend, but a snap of Garth's fingers recalled her, and with nervous promptitude she turned and rejoined him.

He placed a proprietary hand on her shoulder. "Here! You're conducting this tour," he said. "Show me something else interesting!"

Half against her will, yet feverishly eager to obey his behest, Dona went with him. After all, Kitty would keep, but Garth—Garth was too rare a visitor and too imperious to be denied.

He laughed down at her as he led her through the tent. "Little duffer!" he said. "Why do you let them all wipe their feet on you? You ought to be miles above a rabble like this."

"Oh!" said Dona, gasping.

"Little duffer!" he said again, releasing her. "You've got wings—use them!"

She hardly knew what happened after that, for it seemed for a space that she walked on air in a strange seventh heaven of which she had no knowledge. She felt almost delirious with excitement and delight, but she did not show it. She only kept very close to Garth, buoyed by the consciousness that he willed her to do so.

The prize-giving came upon her almost unawares. She would gladly have escaped it, for it called her back to earth. But Mrs. Conyers was full of motherly enthusiasm, and would not for worlds have allowed her to miss it.

She stood on one side of the crowd that ranged in a large semi-circle before Lady Fontleigh and the Cragstone Park party. Colonel Fontleigh stood by his mother's side and read out the names of the prizewinners, the sporting events being taken first. Several of their friends were grouped with them, and it

seemed to Dona that Garth ought to have been amongst them instead of standing there with her.

The scene was a cheerful one. The evening sun, warm and golden, cast long shadows along the grass. The bandsmen wiped their hot faces and sprawled at ease under the shade of a kindly oak-tree. Their services would soon be required again, for dancing was to begin when the prizes had been distributed. The tea-tent was being cleared for the purpose, and some refreshment stalls had been set up within a short distance. Dona, standing close against Garth's shoulder, had a vagrant longing to stay on for the evening festivities. The thought of them had held no appeal for her before, but in his company—only of course it could hold no appeal for Garth either. How could it? She put it from her as absurd.

Time passed in alternate calling of names and clapping of hands. The Flowers section was reached at last. Garth moved and looked down at her.

"Your turn coming!" he murmured.

His eyes chaffed her, and a sudden answering spirit of gaiety entered into Dona. She laughed back at him lightly, spontaneously.

"Wouldn't you like my prize? You may have it."

"Better not be too generous!" warned Garth. "I may ask for something you don't want to part with."

She laughed again at such a ridiculous supposition, and then in a moment choked back her merriment at the sound of her name.

"Miss Dona Celestis!" said Colonel Fontleigh, frowning slightly over the paper in his hand. "I hope I've got that right. It sounds like the name of a flower. First prize for bouquets!"

They made way for her, and Dona went forward, still feeling as if she trod the air.

Lady Fontleigh was holding out a dainty coral necklace. "I congratulate you," she said, smiling. "Your flowers were lovely." And her son muttered to his wife: "It is the name of a flower, by Jove!"

Dona whispered her thanks and went back with her prize accompanied by the usual round of applause.

As she slipped into her place by Garth's side, he made a motion of recognition and lifted his hat to Mrs. Fontleigh whose hand had waved in greeting.

"Oh, do you know her?" questioned Dona.

"Professionally," said Garth. "What's that trash they've given you? Let me see!"

"It's beautiful," declared Dona. "I love coral."

"All right." He took it from her. "Let's put it on and see how you look in it!" He fastened it deftly on her neck, his fingers cool and smooth as the necklace itself. Then: "I think we'll back out of this now," he said, "before the County get on the scent. Come along!"

They extricated themselves just as Miss Katherine Frobisher was called upon in stentorian tones to receive her prize. At the back of the throng Garth paused, laughing.

"There goes your friend to collect her ill-gotten gains. Does everybody score off you as easily?"

She began another difficult disclaimer, but was checked by the sight of her old friend Mrs. Dipper who pounced suddenly upon her from the outskirts of the crowd as though she had been lying in wait.

"Oh, there you are now, Dona! I've bin a-lookin' for you all the afternoon. Could you spare yourself a minute—just to speak to me?"

Dona stopped immediately. Mrs. Dipper had always been kind to her in her gruff repressive way.

Garth looked back with a hint of impatience.

"I'll catch you up," Dona said. "You and Mrs. Conyers go on! Please do!"

"Don't be long!" he said.

"No, I won't. What is it, Mrs. Dipper?" Dona turned to this gaunt, unprepossessing friend of hers, and saw deep lines of anxiety on the parchment face.

"It's Everest, my dear," said Mrs. Dipper, and to her surprise Dona saw the tears well up in the eyes which had always seemed to regard life so grimly. "They say as he's a-goin' to buy it," with an emphatic nod of her bonneted head in the direction of Garth's retreating figure. "Don't you think as you could get him to keep on me and Spademore? We been there along o' old Mr. Garrett so many years now."

"Oh, is that it?" said Dona, enlightened.

Mrs. Dipper nodded again, and one of the tears leaped from her eye to Dona's cheek. "Yes, that's it—that's it! I'm a widow and

getting on in life. Everest's home to me, and I'll do all as I possibly can to make it a happy one for you. I'd like to do for you, Dona. You were always a good little gal."

"For me!" said Dona, her dark eyes opening very wide.

"Oh, is it still a secret?" said Mrs. Dipper. "There now! I oughtn't to 'a' said it. But you might put in a good word for me when the time comes, my dear. I'm not so young as I were, nor Spademoore either."

"Oh, Mrs. Dipper!" Dona's face had a shocked look. "You mustn't—you mustn't! It's—it's not anything like that. Of course not! It's only for a friend of his."

Mrs. Dipper removed her other tear and looked at Dona with a smile and a sniff both of which were eloquent of the incredulity which she was too polite to express in any other form. "Well, I'm sorry if I've spoke too soon," she said. "Folks talk, you know. But you'll bear me in mind all the same, won't you? It means a lot to me, and Spademoore he don't want to be out o' work so long as he's this side o' seventy. There, you run along and enjoy yourself! Make hay while the sun shines, I always say."

Dona escaped with something of panic in her flight. People were impossible—impossible—with their hints and surmisings. Kitty had been bad enough, but she had learnt not to take much notice of her. But Mrs. Dipper upon whom she had always looked with a certain veneration—Mrs. Dipper made her feel like a blown moth whose puny efforts at self-assertion were foredoomed to failure. She did not know which way to turn for shelter.

"What's the old hag want?" said Garth, smiling at her heated condition when she overtook them.

She smiled back with an effort, feeling that something must be done to spread a decent cloak over the crudities of rumour. "Oh, it's only—she wants to be taken on at Everest with whoever comes there. She's been there so long."

"Wanting you to use your influence, eh?" questioned Garth.

Mrs. Conyers interposed. "You might do very much worse for your friend, Garth. Mrs. Dipper is an excellent manager and used to taking care of single gentlemen."

"Oh, is she?" said Garth. He gave his mother a quizzical look. "In that case I'm afraid she wouldn't be very suitable."

"He's married, is he?" said Mrs. Conyers in mild surprise.

"No." With whimsical amusement he answered her. "Not at present."

"Then why——" began Mrs. Conyers.

He continued his explanation, still smiling. "He chances to be a lady, that's all, and—from what I've seen of them—ladies generally like to manage their own affairs."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Conyers.

Dona said nothing; but she suddenly realised that the sun had gone down behind the trees and there was a chill in the air.

CHAPTER XIII

THE JOY-RIDE

AT THE gate a surprise awaited them in the form of Michael who had just walked over to have a look round.

"I saw the prize-giving was in progress so kept out of it," he said. "You got your prize all right?" He looked at Dona.

She mustered a smile in answer. "You ought to have come earlier," she said.

"Oh, I've seen all I want to see," said Michael. "You're all coming home to tea now, are you? I suppose you'll take the mother, Garth? Dona and I will follow in the cart."

Garth's look also came to Dona. "I don't suppose the mater cares," he said easily. "You can come with me if you like."

Dona hesitated, and Mrs. Conyers at once turned to her. "Will you be cold in that frock, dear? It's only muslin."

"P'raps I'd better go in the pony-cart," said Dona.

"Nonsense!" said Garth. "You won't catch cold. A girl of your age oughtn't to think of such things. Come along! I'll take you."

"Let her do as she likes!" said Michael; but the die was already cast.

Dona went after Garth without a backward glance.

"It isn't far," said Mrs. Conyers. "And I'm sure she'd rather."

Michael moved without further words in the direction of their own humbler conveyance.

Garth paused for his companion to overtake him. "You haven't been in my new car," he said.

"Oh, have you got a new one?" said Dona.

He had left it under some trees. "There it is!" he said, as they approached. "What do you think of it?"

"It's beautiful of course," said Dona.

"We'll go for a run if you like," he said.

She glanced round. "Oh, but—Mrs. Conyers and Michael—they'll be waiting for us."

Garth was lighting a cigarette. He looked at her, laughing

through the smoke. "Child," he said, "don't be so conscientious or I shall do something desperate! The prim proprieties of the village are like a thick fog preventing not only rapid travelling but any sort of progress whatever."

Dona flushed. "I'm sorry," she said. "I only thought——"

"Don't!" he begged. "Don't think! You're too young. Jump in and enjoy yourself for once!"

She got in, but with less than her usual alacrity when obeying his behests.

He slipped into the seat beside her. "Here's my overcoat! Put it round you! We'll pass them if you like and let them know."

"Thank you," murmured Dona.

He helped her to adjust the coat and flicked her cheek with his fingers in doing so. "Why so dubious all of a sudden? Don't you want to come?"

She looked at him with starry eyes. "You know I love to come."

"All right then," said Garth.

He started the engine and ran the little car out on to the drive. "We shall probably pass them before they reach the road," he said.

He was right. They sighted the pony-cart almost immediately, and he sent forth a long hoot of warning as they overtook it.

"We're off for a spree," he shouted, as they drew alongside. "Expect us when you see us!"

And with that he flashed away.

To Dona, whose experience of motor travel was confined to fussy and by no means rapid local omnibuses, the swift rush that followed was like the flight of a swallow. In a moment, it seemed, care was left behind, and exultation of an almost delirious kind took its place. She felt wildly excited, as though she wanted to laugh and sing. She had not known that life could hold such ecstasy, and it went to her head like wine.

Garth also seemed to feel something of the same exhilaration, for he drove like a man inspired, darting through shady lanes and out across open country with absolute confidence and never a pause for direction.

Dona, who had lived for so long at Cragstone, very speedily lost all idea of locality. If she had ever travelled that way before, she could not remember it. Besides, everything looked different to-night.

The sun was almost out of sight, just a red rim in pearly mist low down on the horizon. Great rolling hills stretched on all sides. She had no longer the smallest notion as to the whereabouts of the Mill and that every-day world of hers. She might have been transported to another planet—one nearer to the sun, as Carlo would have said.

She had taken off her hat, and her golden hair was flying back from her head like the hair of the wing-footed Mercury of whom Uncle Simon had taught her. Time and space were alike annihilated, as though her spirit had indeed escaped all earthly bounds. When Garth slackened speed at last, she clasped her hands and entreated him not to stop.

He gave her a curious glance. "You're fey," he said. "I always thought you were—at the back of your prim little soul. Where do you want to go to? Tell me that!"

She could not tell him, but she found words to express her desire notwithstanding. "Anywhere with you!" she said. "Anywhere—anywhere!"

Garth laughed. Overhead a peewit sailed with a melancholy crying.

The dusk was falling. He brought the car softly to a standstill. They were on a narrow road that wound between heathery spaces in which grey boulders showed here and there like giant playthings flung earthwards by the gods. It was desolate and eerie. Far away in the unseen, dusk-veiled folds of the hills there sounded the vague bleating of wandering sheep.

"What would you do," jested Garth. "if I were to set you down here and leave you to find your own way back?"

She shivered and drew involuntarily closer to him. "I couldn't do it. I should never get there."

She heard his laugh, low, faintly cynical. "I have indeed brought you far astray! There goes the last of the sun! It'll be dark directly. D'you want to get back?"

"No," said Dona.

"Honestly?" he said with an odd insistence. "You'd sooner be with me than anybody, would you?"

"Of course I would!" murmured Dona.

Garth seemed to ponder her answer for a moment or two, and then, very deliberately, he turned and took her by the shoulders. "Look at me!" he commanded.

She raised her eyes fully to his, dark eyes that burned with a mute adoration. She trembled a little, but she did not flinch or attempt to hide the flame. It was not in her to do so.

Garth looked long and close ere he spoke again. "What about that fellow I ducked this afternoon? Did you say that to him?"

She shrank as if he had struck her. "How can you ask me that?" she said.

He stooped to her. "Can't you see I'm trying you?" he said. "I want to know what you are—child, elf, spirit—which?"

She answered him in a throbbing whisper. "I am just—whatever you want me to be."

His arm went round her. "Dona!" His voice was sunk very low; it had in it a quality she had never heard before. "Would you like me to kiss you?"

She lifted her lips in instant and swift response. "Oh, yes!" she breathed. "Yes!"

"Sure?" he said.

She slipped her hands behind his neck in wordless sweet surrender. His lips, firm and purposeful, met hers, and in that supreme moment her very soul seemed to faint with rapture.

"Oh!" she whispered at last, as that long kiss ended.

"Still alive?" jested Garth softly.

She hid her face against his neck, still clinging closely. The wonder that possessed her was such as to overwhelm her utterly. She was shaken from head to foot like a budding flower caught in a whirling tempest.

Suddenly she cried out to him almost in fear. "Oh, Garth—Garth!"

He lifted her into his arms. "There! Is that better? Let me kiss you again! You child—you precious child!"

She gave herself up to him then without restraint in a wild passion of giving that was both ecstasy and agony—seeming in the same breath to do violence to her deepest instincts and yet to slake an unbearable thirst which was deeper yet.

And Garth, faintly laughing, gathered her to his breast and held her fast, his face to hers . . .

Softly the darkness gathered around them, and stars twinkled forth in the calm night sky.

Dona stirred from a long stillness, as if awaking, and drew a hard slow breath.

"Well?" said Garth.

Her lips caressed his cheek. "It has been lovely," she whispered.

He pushed his fingers through her hair, making her eyes look up to his. They glimmered with a strange fire in the starlight—a swift, consuming fire.

For a space he held her so, looking at her with a straight, unwavering dominance. Then: "It's been good, has it?" he said. "You like being with me?"

A low sound that was like a sob escaped her. "You—know!" she said.

He kissed her parted lips. "Yes, I know. You're rather wonderful, Dona—in your funny little way." He kissed her again with a mastery that made her thrill anew. "I believe you'd give me—everything—if I asked for it."

"I would give you—everything," she said, her eyes wide open and burning to his gaze.

His breath quickened a little. He pulled her close for a few seconds, so close that she gasped for air; then his hold relaxed again.

"Well, remember this!" he said, and his voice held a warning that sounded stern. "Whatever I may ask, and whatever you may give, is between ourselves alone. Is that understood?"

"Yes," she answered. "Yes, of course. It doesn't matter to anyone else."

"No," said Garth. "The things that happen between you and me matter to nobody. They are private—as they always have been. You never told about that spanking I once gave you?"

"Never—never!" Her voice had a sound of tears.

"That's all right then." He pushed her gently back into the seat beside him. "Just remind yourself of that if anyone ever asks any questions! Now I'm going to take you back. And you are to remember—" he spoke impressively—"it has been just a joy-ride—and nothing else."

She clung to his arm. "Of course—of course I'll remember! Garth, don't you trust me?"

He looked at her, and his sternness passed. "Yes, all right," he said, and gave her the kiss for which she mutely craved. "I trust you. I'm your master, and you know it. If you didn't—" he laughed a little—"I'd soon make you."

She bent her head in answer and pressed her lips to his sleeve. "There's one thing you couldn't make me do," she said, her voice so low that he had to stoop to catch it.

He fingered the tendrils of hair about her neck. "Oh? That's interesting," he said. "And what may that be?"

She bent her head a little lower, not answering.

"Tell me!" he said imperatively.

"Suppose I don't?" whispered Dona with a faint tremulous laugh.

His fingers closed upon her neck, pressing it downwards till her forehead was on his knee. "Tell me!" he said again.

She made no resistance. Only for a few seconds of insistence on his part and suspended submission on hers she remained silent. Then with a sudden movement in which she seemed to abandon her will to his, she stretched her arms about his knees, clasping them tightly, and told him.

"You couldn't—make me—love you," she said, passionately striving for utterance with an emotion that seemed to choke her, "because—because——"

"Because?" said Garth, slowly lifting her again with arms that caressed and compelled.

She turned and hid her face upon his breast, laughing and crying convulsively. "Oh, I wish I could die to-night!" she sobbed wildly. "I love you so—I love you so!"

"Little duffer!" said Garth. "Little Dona Celestis! But it's better to live than to die!"

He leaned across and opened the car door, still holding her. "Come!" he said. "We'll get out, shall we? And I'll crown you queen of the heather."

CHAPTER XIV

THE RETURN

MRS. CONYERS was at the garden-gate looking anxiously for them when they returned. Her clear voice greeted them through the scented darkness of the night as they stopped.

"Oh, here you are, Garth! I was beginning to wonder. Is all well?"

"Very well, Mater," said Garth, with cheery reassurance. "I went a little further than I intended, that's all, to please Dona. It's such a gorgeous night."

Dona descended and went in at the gate; the glory of the starlight was still in her eyes. "It's been—wonderful," she said.

"You'll be tired," said Mrs. Conyers.

"Of course not!" said Dona.

She moved into the lamplight at the open door. Her face was flushed and laughing. She had never looked lovelier than at that moment. It was as though the splendour of the night had cast a spell upon her.

"Come into the kitchen!" said Mrs. Conyers. "You must be famished."

"Oh, no, I'm not," laughed Dona. "I'm only rather thirsty."

"You shall have some cocoa," said Mrs. Conyers.

She took the girl's hat gently from her and led her down the passage.

From the sitting-room there sounded a step, and Michael's big form blocked the doorway. He stood and looked at Dona as she passed.

"You've had a good spell," he said.

"Yes." She paused a second. "We went almost to Tetherstones. The heather's all out. It's lovely."

"They say it's an evil place at night," said Mrs. Conyers.

"How can they?" said Dona.

She passed on to the kitchen where Mrs. Conyers had reserved a meal for them, and in a few moments Garth joined them after putting the car into the big barn.

"Did you think we were never coming back?" he asked complacently. "It's that monkey's fault. She seemed to think home and bed were the last things on earth to be considered."

Dona's laugh had a wild, almost challenging note. "I wish I were a gipsy," she said, "to stay out all night long under the stars—with the fairies."

Mrs. Conyers smiled at her indulgently. "What an idea! It isn't always summer, you know. Fancy the Tetherstones Moor in winter! How bleak it must be!"

"She'd have to get some obliging fairy to turn her into a dormouse," said Garth.

"And creep into the heather and sleep," said Dona. "Yes, I'd love that. Sleep isn't such a waste of time in the winter."

"You wait till you're a little older," said Mrs. Conyers. "You won't be so inclined to despise your night's rest then."

Dona looked up at her with quick compunction. "Oh, you've been sitting up for us! I'm so sorry. Are you very tired?"

Mrs. Conyers passed a tender hand over her bright hair without replying. Michael, leaning against the other side of the table, glanced at the clock.

Dona's eyes followed his. "Oh!" she exclaimed, aghast. "It can't be as late as that!"

Garth laughed. "Well, it's been a gala day, hasn't it? Anyhow, to-morrow's Sunday, so we can all make up for it."

"I'm so sorry," Dona said again.

Mrs. Conyers' hand still stroked her hair. "Finish your supper, child," she said, "and we'll all go to bed."

"I really don't want anything. I've finished. Let's go!" said Dona.

"Just the cocoa, dear!" said Mrs. Conyers, bending over her almost as though she had been a little child again. "I'd like you to have that."

She poured some cold milk into the cup, and Dona drank. Then she got up, throwing a quick glance around that barely reached Garth lounging at the end of the table.

"Good night!" she said. "Thank you for the joy-ride."

He nodded a careless acknowledgment. "Sleep well! And don't dream of spooks! You've got to lend a hand in re-designing The Old Cottage to-morrow. Don't forget!" He turned to Michael.

"People who win prizes for artistic merit must be made to turn their talents to account."

"Oh, is that the idea?" said Michael.

He did not sound greatly interested, nor did he look at Dona as she slipped past him.

As she went out with Mrs. Conyers, he stooped and knocked out the ashes from his pipe against the grate.

"Well, I'm going to lock up," he said. "I suppose you're not going to sit up much longer?"

"You suppose right," said Garth, leaning back and lighting a cigarette.

He said no more and Michael straightened himself and left the room.

His steps were audible for a space as he moved about the passages, and the sounds of shooting bolts mingled with them. Then, without returning to the kitchen, he went upstairs, and the firm closing of his own door told of his retirement for the night.

When that final sound reached Garth, he raised his brows with a faint smile as though in answer to some inward remark; then he moved into the old leathern arm-chair in the corner and blew a luxurious cloud of smoke into the air.

He was still seated thus, comfortably smoking, when Mrs. Conyers slipped down in her dark red flannel dressing-gown a few minutes later to put away the remains of the meal.

"Aren't you going to bed, Garth?" she said.

He looked at her with lazy amusement through the smoke. "I don't know, Mater. Why? Do you advise it?"

She began to put the plates together gravely, not looking at him. "It's getting late," she said, "and you've done a lot of travelling to-day."

"Travelling is a rest," said Garth.

She made no rejoinder, but quietly finished her task. Then she came to his side. "Good night, Garth!" she said.

He lifted his face. "How medieval and saint-like you look!" he said.

She did not smile as she bent to kiss his forehead. "It isn't saints we need in this world," she said, "so much as clean honest people with pure hearts."

"That's a sermon in one sentence," observed Garth. "Now I shan't go to church to-morrow."

"I hope," said his mother very quietly, "that you will do as you think right." And then she too went away.

Garth finished his cigarette, stretched himself and took a candle from the dresser. The cynical smile still lingered about his face.

He ascended the old creaking stairs with feet that were accustomed to tread softly in sick-rooms. When he reached the narrow passage that led to Dona's room he paused a moment and shielded the candle-flame with his hand while he looked along it. There was no light visible. With a slight shrug he passed on to his own room on the other side of the old-fashioned house.

And in her own dark chamber Dona relaxed from an attitude of tense listening and sank face downwards on her bed. Out in the open, out in the wild, nothing had seemed impossible or alarming. But here, back in the old house, the old homely atmosphere, she felt like a helpless insect suddenly realising itself caught in a web that bound it beyond all hope of escape. What had looked like freedom now seemed to her like the edge of the pit, and she lay trembling and aghast. Her only comfort—as once long ago—lay in the thought that no one knew, or ever could know. . . .

Hark! A sound in the quiet night! She turned her head to listen. It was the deep note of the ancient clock in the kitchen, striking midnight. She lay and counted the strokes. It was like the tolling of a bell—a passing-bell. As she heard it she shivered from head to foot.

When it ceased, a fevered impulse moved her to arise. She slipped from her bed and found the matches.

Lighting the candle on her little dressing-table she saw herself in the glass above it—a slim white figure in a thin nightdress, white-armed, white-necked, white-faced. The dark eyes that met hers had a startled, haunted look, and she quivered afresh as though she had encountered something unknown within herself. Instinctively she sought to avoid them, and in so doing had a sudden sight of the tumbled golden hair which she had forgotten to tend. It clustered in a shimmering mass, loosely curling about her forehead, and in amongst it, here and there, imprisoned amongst the gold, she caught a glimpse of tiny heather-bells—like fragments of amethyst.

Swiftly her hands went up. She thrust her fingers through her hair and shook it. Then she seized her comb and vigorously pushed it through and through the thick locks. Finally, she

paused and peered at herself again, panting. The heather-bells were gone.

Down by the river an owl uttered a melancholy hooting. She blew out her candle and turned to the window.

The night was full of stars. She leaned out, and the scent of the dewy jessamine just below came up to her. It was a scent that generally filled her with delight. But to-night—to-night——

Down by the river the owl called again, but there was no answering cry. It seemed to be alone—alone and mourning for something that was lost.

END OF PART I

PART II

CHAPTER I

THE OWNER OF EVEREST

FLORENCE ARMITAGE sat in the low shady drawing-room of Everest, lost in thought. She had arrived only the evening before, and her greatest treasures were yet waiting to be unpacked. But she was not a person to do anything hastily. Moreover, after a prolonged illness, she was compelled to move slowly. Everything regarding which her personal supervision could be dispensed with had been done for her. The carpets she had chosen had been laid, the furniture arranged. Perhaps she would re-arrange it all later on. But for the moment it sufficed. The pale dim greens and golds she had selected in convalescence had all been faithfully materialised. It was almost an exact reproduction of her languid dreams. Very soon it would resolve itself into the artist's paradise of her desire. It was really extraordinary how her wishes had been grasped and translated. Though her own personal touch was lacking there was nothing in her surroundings to which she could take exception. She lounged in the deep settee in lazy contentment. Presently—when Garth came—she would make a few suggestions which he could carry out under her eye; but she would keep her promise to him and refrain from exerting herself in any direction until he gave her leave.

Garth! She always thought of him as that though actually she had never yet addressed him by his Christian name. Outwardly, they were still doctor and patient. But this Everest idea had emanated from him. There could be little doubt as to whither he intended that it should ultimately lead. She leaned her light brown head back upon the soft green cushion and gave herself up to the thought of him.

She was like a delicately-tinted pastel, lying there—not beautiful, but exquisitely finished, supremely artistic. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were light brown like her hair. Her eyes were light brown too with glints of green. Her face was of the clear pallor that never tans, the features small and regular, in perfect proportion. Everything about her was in the same unvarying accord.

Florence's face was delicately flushed as she smiled up at him. "The night was not quite so divine, but I think it was curiosity more than anything else that kept me awake. I want to walk all round my new domain and see everything."

Garth lifted the plate from the chair that Sister Cox had designed for a table and sat down, surveying her critically.

"I don't think we'll be in a hurry for that," he said. "Get used to the house first!"

She made a small grimace that scarcely expressed displeasure. "You are always so cautious. But I expect you are right. I should only want to do things at every turn. The garden looks charming at a distance, but——"

"I know," said Garth. "It's all old-fashioned from beginning to end—all hollyhocks and sunflowers, plus a very aged retainer who is always digging. He goes by the appropriate name of Spademore, by the way, and I rather doubt if he can do anything else."

They laughed together, and Florence nestled back into her cushions with a satisfied gesture. "And the ogress in the kitchen whose name is Mrs. Dipper! Where did you discover this weird collection? It feels like a fairy-tale. I am almost expecting to turn into a princess at any moment."

"I am afraid you may have some difficulty in finding the prince," said Garth.

"Oh, I don't know." The light eyes challenged his under lids that slightly flickered. "He may not be very far away. Nothing would surprise me in this place. I begin to feel that I could even wave a magic wand myself."

"That is probably what you will have to do," he said with a certain gravity, "in the end."

She sank deeper into her cushions. "The difficulty is to find the wand, isn't it? Especially if I am not allowed to go out and look for it!"

"I shan't be hampering your movements much longer," he said, still attentively observing her. "I think I may safely prophesy that you may be relieved of even Sister Cox's attentions before long."

She pursed her lips. "And then there will be nobody left to call me 'dear' when I need humouring! I shall miss that."

"You will be able to humour yourself," said Garth, "with your paints and brushes."

"Don't be silly!" said Florence. "You're offering me stones for bread."

"Well, I daresay Cox would stay on for a bit," he said, "if that's all."

Her eyes suddenly flashed at him. "That isn't all, Dr. Repton. You know quite well that I should be delighted to see the last of her, good sort as she is. She is simply a puppet so far as I am concerned. So is almost everyone else. It's so seldom—so very seldom—that one meets anyone to talk to."

"Really?" said Garth. "Aren't you rather hard to please?"

"Perhaps unfortunately," said Florence, dropping her eyelids cynically, "I am gifted with a certain amount of brain."

"And that prevents you feeling sociable?" he questioned, leaning forward a little.

"It prevents my enjoying the society of fools," she responded, tacitly refusing to look up.

"I see," he said. "I agree with you. Fools are hard to bear with."

She flicked her fingers. "Oh, give me the devil! He has at least a sense of humour."

Garth laughed. "You speak as an intimate, and—once again—I agree."

"Give me a cigarette!" said Florence. "Sister Cox has hidden mine."

He took out his case. "Now you are making a devil of me—or is it a slave? I ought not to countenance it."

"Only a confederate," she said, coolly taking the case from him and abstracting three cigarettes. "You may smoke one yourself if you like, but no one—not even the great Garth Repton—is going to stop me."

Garth's grey eyes gleamed a little. "I would if I considered it really bad for you," he said.

The cigarette was already between her lips. He pulled out a lighter and held it for her. Through the smoke their eyes met like clashing steel, and then with a half-laugh Florence once more evaded the encounter.

"Light up—light up!" she said. "And don't be aggressive!"

Garth shook his head. "One thing at a time! I am attending to

you at the moment. I'm sorry if you don't like it, but after all it's what I'm here for."

"Well, don't make me tired!" she said. "And—however pettish I may become—for pity's sake don't call me 'dear'!"

He laughed again quietly, with some assurance. "It's as well to warn me beforehand. Now tell me what's the matter!"

She smoked her cigarette rapidly, with a hint of discontent, her eyes downcast. He wondered if she realised how much more alluring she was when her lids were lowered.

"Tell me!" he said again. "I am all attention."

"Attention," observed Florence, "is not always synonymous with sympathy."

"That sounds rather trite for you," he said. "But I suppose it's only your neat way of hedging."

"Perhaps it is," she admitted. "Perception is your strong point. You really ought not to need to ask any questions."

"Perhaps I don't," said Garth. "Only—sometimes—it's better to be told a thing than to guess it."

"You're quite at liberty to guess," she said. "Will you give me that plate for an ash-tray, as Sister Cox would say?"

He stooped and set the plate by her side. "Well, if I am really to read your thoughts——" he said, and held out his hand to her.

She hesitated for the fraction of a second, and then laid her own within it.

"Don't tremble!" said Garth.

She raised her eyes indignantly. "How dare you say that? You are trying to make me nervous."

"Keep just like that!" he ordered, smiling. "Don't wriggle! I shan't hurt you. You're telling me everything I want to know."

"I shall be telling you to go in a moment," she said, her breath quickening a little.

"And you'll be calling me back before I've got round the corner," said Garth. "Keep still! I haven't quite done."

"You're making me furious," she protested in a rapid undertone.

"I don't know why," he said. "I had your permission." His hand still held hers very firmly; there was considerable restraint in its clasp.

And Florence Armitage slowly stiffened and as slowly relaxed, as if she had been under the influence of an electric battery.

"You're very—merciless," she said at length.

"Still furious?" asked Garth, still smiling a little.

She shook her head. "No. But I didn't give you permission to turn me inside out."

He laid her hand down and gently patted it. "Why should you object to my knowing? You're only thinking that under certain conditions you might be bored in this place."

She caught at the suggestion almost eagerly. "Yes. I have been thinking that. Why did you make me buy it? It's very sweet of course—but almost too idyllic for every-day existence."

"It wasn't an expensive fancy, was it?" he said.

"Oh, I can afford it of course." She spoke half-contemptuously. "I could afford a dozen such."

"That's what I thought," said Garth. "I knew you could pay for your whims."

"But this was your whim!" she said.

He made a gesture of assent. "My whim—yes. I thought you would like the place, and that you would find suitable subjects in the neighbourhood for your art while you were recovering your strength. But I certainly never intended you to spend the rest of your life here. It's only a holiday camp for you."

"Never intended!" She reiterated the words rather weakly, as if there were something in the calm words that took her breath away.

Garth smiled at her and stood up. "Didn't you know I had other designs for you? But I needn't go into that now. You're tired. I'll see Sister Cox and take her report." He walked across to the door and paused, looking back at her. "I hope this—*séance*—hasn't been too much for you," he said. "It has told me a good deal that I greatly wanted to know."

He was gone with the words, gone with the quiet purposeful swing of the man who knows his own mind. And as the door closed noiselessly upon him, Florence Armitage put her hands up to her head as though dazed. In all the thirty-two years of her life she had never before met any man who took as this man took, coolly, astutely, offering nothing in return.

And yet—very curiously—she loved him for it.

CHAPTER II

THE STUDIO

ON THE following day Garth gave his patient permission to explore to the fullest extent of her domain under his own supervision and with the support of Sister Cox.

Florence herself would gladly have dispensed with the latter's attendance, but Garth was determined upon that point. He would take no risks, he said. So, with his arm on one side to support her and Sister Cox's on the other, Florence sallied forth.

It was a golden day in early September, and the sun was shining with a transient warmth that drew out many fragrances in the old garden. They moved slowly, with several pauses, down the path that led to the gate into the apple-orchard, which in its turn gave access to the overgrown plot of ground that surrounded The Old Cottage where long ago Carlo had stepped from his tent into the open air.

A young thrush was warbling in one of the ancient gnarled trees as they approached, and Florence, tottering a little, lifted her face at the sound.

"That is a welcome for you," said Garth.

She smiled at him without replying.

"We're nearly there, dear," said Sister Cox.

They moved slowly through the orchard where the apples clustered red and golden on the trees. There had been a wind in the night, and a good many also lay on the ground. Near the gate that led into The Old Cottage garden, a girlish figure in a pink overall was bending to gather the windfalls into a large basket.

"Who is that?" said Florence.

The figure stood up quickly at the sound of her voice and turned towards them. Dark, wonderful eyes flashed a swift half-deprecating glance towards them. There was an involuntary backward movement as of self-effacement as Garth made smooth rejoinder.

"That—is Dona Celestis—my mother's adopted daughter. Come here, Dona, and be introduced to Miss Armitage!"

Dona hesitated, and came. Her face was flushed. She had a shy, childish look. Her hair shone deeply golden in the sunshine.

"Dona Celestis!" repeated Florence slowly. She looked at the girl with absolute self-possession, as a queen might look at a subject. "That's rather a curious name, isn't it? Now where—have I seen your image before?"

"Perhaps—you knew Carlo," suggested Dona, almost under her breath.

Florence was frowning as one who wrestles with memory. "I once knew an artist called Peregrine," she said. "He was quite mad—mad as a hatter—as most geniuses are."

"That was—Carlo," said Dona simply.

Florence still stared at her, frowning. "I've got a miniature that he did—somewhere," she said. "I was his pupil for a time. He gave it to me because he said it was worthless. Now where—" she turned abruptly to Garth—"This child could hardly have been born then. How old is she?"

"How old are you, Dona?" said Garth.

"I shall be eighteen," said Dona, "in December."

"Ah!" Florence spoke in the tone of one seeking to trace an elusive vision. "It was about fifteen years ago. I was barely seventeen myself. But I've got the miniature. I'll find it. It's an amazing likeness—except for the hair. And you know this man Peregrine?" She addressed Dona again.

Dona made an affirmatory gesture that was not without dignity. "We lived here," she said, "in The Old Cottage, until he died."

"What an extraordinary thing!" said Florence. "How did he get hold of you, I wonder?"

"I don't remember," said Dona.

"She was a tiny child when they first came here," explained Garth.

"And he called her—Dona Celestis! She must have belonged to him," said Florence.

"Probably," said Garth significantly.

Sister Cox broke in. She was tired of standing. "Wouldn't it be as well, dear, to get as far as the studio?" she suggested.

"Then you can sit down while I run back and fetch your milk."

"You can run back now," said Garth. "Dona will take your place. Here, Dona! Let Miss Armitage have your arm! She isn't very strong yet and wants help."

"I really think one arm is enough," said Florence. "That is the studio, is it? What a curious ramshackle old place! I wonder if it will be any good."

"Come inside and see!" said Garth.

He had the key in his hand, and he gave it to Dona with the words.

She turned and ran up the cottage-path as if glad to escape, and Florence deliberately held her companion back from following.

"What a very beautiful girl!" she said. "The result of some disreputable connection of Peregrine's, I suppose?"

"It seems a reasonable conclusion," said Garth.

She gave him a quick side-glance. "I remember Charles Peregrine well—a very arresting person. I was half in love with him in those days."

"Perhaps it was as well for you that you stopped at that," suggested Garth.

"Perhaps," she agreed. "I don't think he was overweighted with either scruples or morals. There was generally some sort of scandal wherever he went."

"I can quite believe it," said Garth.

"And your mother adopted the girl?" said Florence.

He bent his head. "The man died penniless—apparently without belongings. Dona was a small child. My mother took her."

"Where did she get all that beauty from?" mused Florence. She glanced at Garth again. "Is she going to be a handful?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "I am not responsible for her. She belongs to my mother—and Michael. It was they who adopted her."

"Rather—decent of them!" commented Florence. "But she'll take some looking after—a girl like that. I should think all the village lads must be crazy about her. How do you keep them off?"

"Don't ask me!" protested Garth. "I am only a casual visitor—a looker-on. She makes herself useful, I believe; but I can't give you any details. It's no affair of mine."

"That's wise of you," said Florence shrewdly. "Well? Shall we go on?"

They pursued their way up the narrow path to the cottage-door which now stood open. Dona was within, waiting for them.

She moved shyly forward as they entered. "I expect you would like to rest on the divan," she said.

Florence gave her a brief smile, and paused, looking round.

The Old Cottage had been completely transformed. The upper storey had been taken away, and the lower thrown into one large apartment. The old lattice-windows had been left and these were shaded by curtains of a soft blue, but a large skylight had been let into the roof, which, combined with white-washed walls, achieved an effect of airy spaciousness such as the place had never before boasted. There was very little furniture—two easels, a basket-chair and the divan which Dona had mentioned which was piled with cushions of many hues.

Florence sank down upon it. "Oh, this is heaven," she said, but whether her remark applied to the welcome relaxation or to her surroundings she did not explain.

Garth sat down in the basket-chair, and Dona remained standing, as if uncertain whether to go or to remain.

After a moment Florence discarded a cushion and cast it at her feet.

"Sit down, child!" she said. "Dr. Garth, may I have a cigarette?"

It was her first use of his Christian name. He accepted it without a sign, and leaning forward offered her the cigarette for which she asked.

She took one as Dona, slightly hesitating, slipped down upon the cushion.

Florence laid her hand for a second upon the golden head. "Dona Celestis!" she said, lingering over the name. "Peregrine called you that, did he? Did he ever paint you?"

"No, never," said Dona, momentarily surprised. "You see, I was quite young when he died."

"You must have been beautiful always," said Florence impartially. "You must sit for me. You ought to make an excellent model. I'd pay you of course—the usual terms. Will you agree to that?"

"Oh, no!" began Dona impulsively, and then she looked up at Garth and was silent.

He had risen to light Florence's cigarette, and his eyes looked down into Dona's for an instant with a definite mastery before which her protest wavered and failed.

"Perhaps you don't realise what the usual terms are," said Florence nonchalantly. "Anyway, I am sure we could come to an arrangement. After all," she smiled at Garth, "it is money that makes the world go round, isn't it?"

He smiled in return, sardonically. "It is not for me to contradict you. But Dona has a good deal yet to learn. No doubt you will prove an able teacher."

Dona looked up eagerly at the words. "Oh!" she said very earnestly. "If you would only teach me to paint!"

"Good gracious, child!" Florence regarded her with indolent amusement. "You don't want much, do you?"

Dona's face was flushed, her eyes beseeching. "Oh, I want to learn—so much," she said. "All my life I've wanted. Could you teach me—just for perhaps a few minutes now and then?"

"She is something of an artist," put in Garth. "This place for instance—it is chiefly her own conception."

Florence looked slowly round, and a gleam of surprise dawned slowly in her eyes. They returned to Dona with a certain amused interest.

"Well," she said, "I congratulate you. I should say you have an eye that sees. But the talent for reproduction does not always go with it. Have you ever done anything?"

Dona's face was deeply flushed. "Nothing that I haven't torn up," she said in a low voice.

Florence's hand caressed her hair again with an artist's touch. "Dear me! How refreshingly modest! Well, my dear, you had better do something and let me see it. Then—if it has any possibilities at all—perhaps I'll strike a bargain with you."

"Oh!" gasped Dona, confused. "You're very kind. But I couldn't—I couldn't——"

"I should postpone the discussion if I were you," said Garth smoothly, "until the something you suggest has materialised. Meantime, here comes the worthy Cox with your milk, so you had better cease to take any active interest in life—unless you want to be put to bed at once!"

Florence gave him a keen and somewhat scathing glance. "Dr. Repton," she said with decision, "I shall not require the services of a nurse much longer, so will you please arrange that Sister Cox leaves when her week is up?"

She spoke with the air of one expecting opposition, but Garth

merely laughed and bowed. "Your wishes," he said, "shall be obeyed, mainly because they coincide with my own."

Florence suffered her features to relax into a smile. "Perhaps that is as well for us both," she said. "I am thoroughly bored with leading the life of an invalid. And now that I have found a model"—her hand was still on Dona's head—"I am going to get to work."

"I wish you every success," said Garth.

Sister Cox entered, fussily cheerful. "I'm afraid I've spilt some of it in the saucer, dear, but the path was so uneven. There now! You drink this down, and then I think you ought to come back and rest. You've done quite enough for your first day."

"On the contrary," said Florence calmly, "I shall remain here until luncheon and unpack a few of my painting things. You can help me, child," to Dona. "And you"—very definitely to Sister Cox—"can go back and wait until I return. I shall not need you again before then."

Sister Cox opened her round eyes. "But what about——"

Garth intervened. "I think Miss Armitage is right, Sister. I will see to it that she does not overtax her strength. You needn't worry. Go out for a walk and enjoy yourself!"

His tone was so definite that Sister Cox had no alternative. With a subdued murmur which might have expressed either remonstrance or acquiescence, she turned and went.

And Florence looked at Garth with a smile of genuine humour. "For this relief much thanks," she said.

CHAPTER III

IN THE SHADOWS

"I SHALL not see you in the morning then?" said Florence, her hand detaining Garth's for the fraction of a second.

He bent over it briefly, punctiliously. "No. That's why I came in to-night. I have to start at six."

"But you're coming down again?" she said.

"Next week-end, yes—unless I am detained." He spoke conventionally.

She regarded him with a half-wistful wonder. "How hard you work! I suppose one patient more or less means nothing to you."

He laughed a little, releasing her hand. "It depends upon the patient."

She made a slightly petulant gesture. "I suppose I am quite relegated to the back row now that I have ceased to be an interesting case."

His cool grey eyes looked with faint banter into hers. "I can't quite picture you there," he said.

She laughed rather mirthlessly. "Well, I promise you I shan't stay here if you don't turn up next week. Nothing on earth will induce me."

He raised his brows. "Not my orders even?"

"No!" she told him definitely. "I only obey your orders when you are personally attending me—not otherwise."

"Oh!" said Garth with his faint smile. "In that case I must make every effort to come down next week-end."

"Certainly," she agreed, "—in your own interests. You work much too hard."

"A matter of opinion," smiled Garth. "Anyhow, mind you don't do the same!"

"Oh, I!" she said. "I shall get down to the real thing now I have got a model. By the way, I suppose that girl won't let me down?"

"Dona?" said Garth. "No, I think you can count on her. Well, I must go. I'm keeping you up."

She glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. "It's only just after ten. I'm not at all tired. I think this place is doing me good."

"I'm glad of that," said Garth. "I hope you will like it. As I said yesterday, it's only a holiday-camp. If you feel lonely, go and see my mother! She is too shy to come and see you."

"Really? I must ask her to tea," said Florence graciously. "And now—before you go—I just want to ask you something."

"Yes?" said Garth.

She looked at him speculatively. "You said something—also yesterday—about having other designs for me. I should—rather—like to know what those other designs are."

"Oh, that!" said Garth. He paused on the point of departure, the lamplight shining on his pale, confident face. "I didn't think I would trouble you with that at present."

"I should like to be troubled," said Florence deliberately.

His eyes met hers again with steady assurance. "I am not sure that the time is yet ripe for discussing winter plans," he said.

Her lids flickered a little. "I should like to have them before me for consideration," she said.

"Would you?" said Garth. "Well," he spoke warily, "I see no serious objection to that. But of course it depends somewhat upon circumstances. I am thinking of suggesting a long sea-voyage for you this winter. It would be the best thing possible from a health point of view."

"Indeed!" said Florence. Her look slowly widened. "And am I to go alone?"

He smiled conventionally. "Doubtless the choice of a companion rests with yourself."

"Does it?" said Florence.

He made a non-committal gesture. "As you say, money will do most things."

"That is your creed too?" she questioned.

"Well, not entirely," said Garth.

She made a curious movement suggestive of a frustrated impulse. "You are always so guarded. To my mind money—too much money—is a handicap rather than an advantage."

"And you have too much?" said Garth.

"Yes." She turned from him almost angrily. "I have too much—far more than I know what to do with."

"You ought to marry," said Garth.

She shrugged a petulant shoulder. "As well as go for a voyage?"

"Couldn't you combine the two?" he suggested.

She laughed rather unsteadily. "It would save looking for a companion, wouldn't it?"

"It would save a good many things in my opinion," said Garth coolly. "Well, that is another plan for your quiet consideration. But don't lie awake over it! I should take a tablet to-night if I were you."

She did not turn. "I doubt if I shall sleep," she said.

"Oh, I hope so," said Garth. "Good night! I will tell Sister Cox you are ready for her."

He was gone. The door closed quietly behind him; and Florence stiffened with clenched hands.

"Why is he so horribly cautious?" she asked herself in a fierce whisper. "I suppose he wants to force me to speak. He is playing me like a fish. Sooner or later—sooner or later—he will have me at his feet—to do as he likes with—accept or refuse—Me!" She barely suppressed a cry; then with a desperate effort controlled herself and sat down. "This is nonsense. He'll speak next time. He's bound to speak. He can't think I should refuse him—now."

She heard Sister Cox's vigorous step outside and swiftly banished all signs of agitation, comforting herself with the thought that she was being unreasonable and impatient. How could he speak while she was still a patient in his charge? It was an impracticable situation, and she must put an end to it as soon as possible.

It would not have reassured her to have seen the smile on Garth's smooth firm lips as he left the house. It was dark outside, for the sky was clouded and the moon not yet risen. He turned to take the short cut through the garden of The Old Cottage to the Mill, but paused at the orchard gate to light a cigarette. He said nothing, for it was not his habit to indulge in soliloquy, but the serenity of his expression spoke for itself. He was fully satisfied with the course of events and, very evidently, saw no reason for attempting to hasten it.

His cigarette kindled, he sauntered on under the old apple-trees, and there by the further gate, close to the spot where he had introduced Dona to Florence that morning, a slight figure awaited him,

very still and vigilant, like a little wild creature on the edge of the path.

The moment he discerned it, he paused. "Dona, is that you?"

She sprang to him without a sound and in a second her thin arms were tense about his shoulders, her face buried against his breast.

"Now what are you doing here?" said Garth.

She clung to him voicelessly, her breathing fast and hard. He put a kindly arm about her.

"Come! What's it all about? Is anything the matter?"

She lifted her face with a swift and passionate movement. Words came from her in a quivering whisper. "I've hardly seen you to-day. I've been waiting in The Old Cottage in the dark. I thought you'd never come." The brief gasping sentences held a hint of tragedy.

Garth stood motionless, still holding her with a slack arm. "It's getting late, child," he said. "You ought to be in bed."

Dona made a faint, rather desperate sound. Her clasping hands tightened convulsively. "I know. They think I am," she said. "But I couldn't go without seeing you. Garth—Garth!" Her low voice held what was almost an agony of supplication. She was trying to draw his head down to her.

But Garth remained upright. "Now don't be silly and hysterical!" he said. "I don't approve of these night adventures. They're too risky."

"Oh, I only wanted to see you for a moment—just for a moment," pleaded Dona. "Don't be angry with me—please—please! Won't you—Garth—won't you kiss me?"

He still resisted her, though his arm tightened a little. "I'll say good night certainly," he said. "You're being very foolish, and I should think you're wet through in this dew."

"No, no, I'm not. And it doesn't matter if I am," she answered recklessly. "Oh, Garth, I've waited such a long time. I simply had to see you."

Her clasped hands were still trying to draw him downwards. He bent very slowly in response to their insistence. "Well, what is it?" he said.

"I wanted to ask about—Miss Armitage." Breathlessly she answered him. "Do you want me to be a model to her? Would it—please you?"

"Oh, that!" said Garth in the tone of one discussing a trifle. "Well, it doesn't greatly matter to me of course, but I think it would be rather silly of you to miss such a chance."

"I'll do—whatever you think best," whispered Dona.

"My dear child," he made light response, "study your own interests, not mine! But if you want to take up art, now's your opportunity."

"I see," said Dona. Her hold suddenly slackened, and she gave a heavy sigh.

"What's that for?" said Garth.

She made no answer, save to turn away from him. But he detained her then with the mastery which he knew so well how to exercise.

"Come! We'll have no nonsense," he said. "You can't play any games with me, you know. Is that all you wanted to see me about?"

"Yes," murmured Dona in a choked voice. "That's—all."

"Then what are you crying for?" he said.

She turned back to him with the gesture of one flinging all restraint away. "Oh, Garth—Garth! I love you so! It hurts—it hurts!"

Her lips were close to his, craving as though parched with thirst. With a faint laugh he yielded to their mute entreaty, then as her whole body thrilled in answer he lifted and held her in his arms.

When he released her, it was she who was laughing, softly, ecstatically, like a child. "Oh, wasn't that lovely? Now I know you're not angry any more. When are you coming down again?"

"Next week-end—perhaps," said Garth. "But not to see you."

She laughed again, pressed close to him. "Of course not! It'll be a professional visit, won't it? Still—you'll come!"

"You monkey!" he said.

She wound his arm caressingly around her neck and softly kissed his hand. "I'm so glad I stayed up to see you. You'll have to go in now. Michael is waiting up for you."

"And what's going to happen to you?" said Garth.

She kissed his fingers again tenderly, lingeringly. "I've left the passage-window unlatched. I shall slip in when everybody's gone up to bed."

"What! Stay out here in the damp?" questioned Garth.

She shook her head. "Oh no! I shall wait in The Old Cottage. I've got the spare key."

"Oh, that's the idea, is it?" said Garth.

"Don't you think it's a good one?" said Dona.

"I don't know. I think I can suggest a better." His arm drew her back to him, and she went, trembling a little. He began to move with her towards the gate. They passed through it together and up the narrow path that led to The Old Cottage.

Then abruptly Garth paused. "All right. You go in and wait!" he said. "I'll come and fetch you when it's safe."

With the words he swung her round, kissed her again with a certain violence, and left her. For a few seconds his footsteps sounded muffled on the grass-grown track; then there came the opening and the closing of the further gate.

Dona stood motionless, listening, while the damp chill of the autumn night crept all about her. Then at length, with a sharp shiver, she turned like some small, burrowing creature seeking shelter, and slipped into the deeper darkness of The Old Cottage.

CHAPTER IV

RELEASE

"STOP if you're tired!" said Michael.

Dona leaned back in her chair, and looked at her typewriter with a somewhat dazed expression. "I'm stupid to-day," she said after a moment. "I've made no end of silly mistakes."

"You'd better knock off," said Michael.

She shook her head. "No. It's got to be done. I'm going down to Everest after tea."

Michael's heavy brows knitted a little. "You see a good deal of Miss Armitage," he said.

"Yes," said Dona; and added half to herself: "You see, she knew Carlo."

"Has she told you anything about him?" demanded Michael.

She glanced at him as though something in his tone pierced her reverie. "Not very much. Only she showed me the miniature he gave her a long time ago which, she says, is like me."

Michael's frown deepened somewhat. "Well? Is it?" he said.

"It may be—a little. But it's much more beautiful," said Dona simply. "The hair is black, and the eyes are like jewels shining in a dark place."

"And who is the lady?" asked Michael.

"I don't know." Dona spoke sadly. "Carlo would have told me. But he isn't here to ask."

"I wonder if he would," said Michael. He was looking at her with a certain penetration. "He may have thought it was better for you not to know too much."

"Yes, perhaps," agreed Dona, and turned back with a faint sigh to her typewriter.

Her fingers resumed their fluttering and none too even progress over the keys for a space while Michael sat, silently watching. Then, rather suddenly, she paused again, and spoke without changing her position.

"I think—perhaps—if I could spare the time—Miss Armitage would give me painting-lessons."

"You!" Michael's tone expressed open astonishment.

"Yes." In a low voice she confirmed her statement. "I've been rather wanting to talk to you about it. I—I would love to learn."

"Oh, I see," Michael said; was silent for a few seconds, then added: "Well, of course I shouldn't stand in your way. It wouldn't be fair to you. Would she do it for nothing?"

"No." Rather hesitatingly came Dona's reply; she fingered the typewriter with a nervous touch. "I shouldn't pay anything of course. In fact, I think she would pay me something."

"What! Pay you for teaching you!" Michael paused in the act of filling his pipe.

Dona's head was bent. She explained with some embarrassment. "She wants me—to give up my whole time to her—as an artist's model."

"Good heavens!" said Michael. He stared at the bowed golden head in sheer amazement. "And you'd do it?" he asked slowly.

Dona made a faint gesture of protest. "I don't think I should mind. She's a woman."

"She is," agreed Michael. "And so are you. D'you think she'd do it for you?"

"But that's quite different," murmured Dona. "We are in very different positions. She is very clever—a well-known artist—a lady."

"And what are you?" demanded Michael almost angrily.

Again she made her small, half-pleading gesture. "I don't know quite—what I am. But—I live on charity."

Michael's pipe clattered suddenly on the floor and he left it there. "Dona," he said, "you are never to say that to me again."

She flinched slightly as though his tone startled her. "But it's true—isn't it?" she said.

"It is not true," asserted Michael with emphasis. "You are my mother's adopted daughter, and more to her than her own sons."

"Oh, no!" said Dona.

"I tell you it is so. She dotes on you. If anything happened to you, she'd break her heart." Michael's voice held stern conviction. "Can't you realise that?"

Dona's head bent a little lower; she made no answer.

Michael continued to look at her with unwavering attention. When he spoke again it was with a measure of grave kindness as

though he sought to reassure her. "As you know, I wanted to put this office business on a paying footing before. I've been meaning to speak to you about it. Only I don't like to think of you as a paid clerk. I would rather have you as a partner."

"Oh, no!" Dona sat upright abruptly, paused an instant, then turned and faced him. "I couldn't possibly be that," she said. "I don't work well enough. It wouldn't be right or fair."

"That depends," Michael said. He stooped to retrieve his pipe, but he did not light it, merely pushed it into his pocket. Then he stood, looking down into her flushed face. "I don't think things are on a very satisfactory footing at present. If you don't like the idea of a partnership, of course I won't press it."

"Oh, no, please!" said Dona.

"But"—Michael's voice was resolute—"if you don't hate the work, I should like you to keep it on, and be paid a fair salary for it."

Dona's hands were clasping each other very lightly. There was distress in her eyes. "It isn't—money that I want," she said rather piteously.

"How do you know?" said Michael, with the ghost of a smile. "You've never had any."

She did not smile in answer. "I do know," she said. "I've always wanted—ever since Carlo died—before that even—to learn to paint. I've never had a chance till now. Miss Armitage says I have it in me, and—d'you know—I think she's right. I believe—if trained—I would do much better at that than typing or figures. And even as a model"—she spoke with an effort, for Michael's brows were formidable—"I could still be learning. It's such a wonderful, wonderful chance."

"You've set your heart on it," said Michael.

She lifted her clasped hands in an unconscious gesture of supplication. "Don't make it impossible, will you? She won't be here very long—only till the end of October. And I've such a lot to learn."

"I can't stop you," Michael said half-grudgingly.

Dona's hands fell. She turned back to the table and stooped over the typewriter. "I don't want—to disappoint you," she said in a voice that slightly shook. "I've loved working in here; but this—this is quite different."

"You needn't work here for another day," said Michael.

She turned to him again; her eyes were full of tears. "Oh, please, do understand! Do try to understand! I don't want to give it up. Only—only——"

"There's something else you want to do more," finished Michael rather curtly. "You needn't be upset. I understand. Only I can't see why you should be an artist's model into the bargain."

"She made it a condition," said Dona. She was standing before him now with the look of a hurt child, piteously beseeching.

Michael made an abrupt movement that had about it something of almost fierce remonstrance. "I don't like that woman," he said. "She's too full of money and self-assurance. My mother thinks the same though she's too kind-hearted to say so. What on earth Garth sees in her"—he stopped himself with a jerk—"well, every man to his taste! But I wish to heaven he'd never brought her here."

"Oh!" said Dona, gasping a little. She was not accustomed to such plain speaking from Michael. "I never knew you didn't like her."

"I like her still less now," Michael said, but his look softened somewhat in spite of the uncompromising words. "Don't go and make a friend of her! Don't trust her! She's not your sort."

"You mean I'm not hers," said Dona. "Of course I realise that. Only—only, Michael, I do so want to learn to paint."

He turned from her with a shrug. Perhaps he could not bring himself to resist those pleading eyes any longer. "Well, as I say, I'm not stopping you. If you feel you must do it, I suppose you will."

He moved to the window with the words, and stood gazing moodily out into the yard. It was a dreary afternoon in late September, and a soft grey rain was falling.

Some seconds passed in total silence. Outside, Joe Best was helping another man to unload sacks of grain from a large farm-cart, his long arms and ungainly figure moving ape-like in the gloom. He whistled as he worked. He was always cheery. Beyond him loomed the dull red buildings of the Mill, and the roar of the machinery reverberated monotonously in its interior. Dash, the spaniel, quite indifferent to the weather, sat in a doorway looking gravely on, while the tortoise-shell cat, Polly, trod delicately over the sacks that had already been off-loaded.

Michael stirred at last. "Well, I must go and take the tally," he began, and checked sharply at the touch of a small hand on his arm.

Dona was beside him, her sweet face very earnestly uplifted. "Michael," she said, and she spoke with an almost desperate resolution, "I won't do it—I couldn't do it—without your permission."

He looked down at her, and an odd tremor went through him. "It doesn't matter to you what I say or think, does it?" he said.

"It does matter," Dona said insistently.

He stood surveying her sombrely. Then: "You're very young," he said, almost as though he were speaking to himself, trying to convince himself. "I suppose you've got to have your experience first. But—for heaven's sake—let there be limits! Don't let her—vamp you! She's the sort of woman to take everything she wants and give nothing in return."

"She's been very kind to me," said Dona.

"Yes. It answers her purpose." He spoke grimly. "Well, go ahead with it! Only—promise me one thing!"

"Yes. What?" said Dona.

He laid his hand quietly and firmly upon hers. "Promise me," he said, "that if you don't like this model business, if she asks anything of you that you'd hate to do, you'll stop it—and come back to me here! Will you promise that?"

"Of course!" said Dona. "Of course!" She looked round at the typewriter with a hint of distress. "I've been very happy here. I don't want to give it up. You know that."

"I know," Michael said. "But this painting craze has got hold of you. I understand perfectly. If you've got a gift, you're quite right to try and develop it."

Dona's eyes came back to his with a quick gleam. "Yes. I think Carlo would have said that. But I may not be any good. Anyhow, I shan't have Miss Armitage to teach me for long. She is talking of going for a long voyage in the winter."

"Oh, is she?" said Michael. He released her hand and turned to go. "Well, anyway thank heaven for that!"

He paused at the door to pull on a mackintosh, and then tramped heavily forth into the yard.

Dona stood at the window and watched him with troubled,

brooding eyes. The hardest part was over, and she was thankful that she had spoken; but the issue had not made her happy.

Standing there, she watched some swallows collecting on the roof opposite for their long flight southward, and with a sudden passionate yearning she wished that she might be going too.

CHAPTER V

THE VISITOR

THOUGH it was not Mrs. Conyers' habit to interfere, Dona half expected some sort of gentle remonstrance from her when the fact that she was no longer working in the office for Michael became known. She knew beyond all question that Michael was her favourite son, and she looked instinctively for some sign of her partiality. But she looked in vain. Mrs. Conyers accepted the situation without comment, and her manner to Dona remained exactly as usual, gentle and sympathetic. She had, if anything, become more tender to the girl of late; but there was no insistence in her love, and she asked no return. It was like a wide-spreading warmth from a fire unseen. And Dona was deeply aware of it, though she responded to it in silence.

She was very silent altogether in those days, coming and going between the Mill and Everest or The Old Cottage like a light-flitting shadow. No one knew exactly how her time was spent, and no one inquired. She was free to follow her own pursuits exactly as she would.

A spell of warm sunny weather succeeded the grey days, and the gold of autumn had begun to spread over the land. The daylight was shortening swiftly, but the nights were full of moonlight and still fragrant with the dying breath of summer.

Kitty Frobisher, who had avoided her friend in a fit of pique ever since the Flower Show, suddenly descended from the pedestal of her egoism and came in search of her towards tea-time on one of those soft October days.

Mrs. Conyers was down the garden, pulling a trug-full of late summer beans. Kitty spied her in the distance, but did not seek her out. Instead, walking warily, she passed the open door of the Mill House and followed the path that led round to the office.

The door of this stood open, and she beat a small tattoo upon it familiarly with her finger-nails. "Anybody at home?" she asked with the easy assurance of one quite sure of her welcome.

There was no immediate response, but after about ten seconds there came a slow unwilling movement from within. Michael in his shirt-sleeves made a reluctant appearance in the doorway.

"Oh!" said Kitty with extended hand and a little laugh that covered all unconventionality. "Good afternoon, Mr. Conyers! Isn't Dona here?"

"Good afternoon!" said Michael, shaking hands without enthusiasm. "No, she isn't."

"What a lovely afternoon!" said Kitty, daring the forbidding look under the beetling black brows with a little smile that was half-deprecatory. "I hope I'm not intruding."

"Yes, lovely," said Michael with eyes that looked beyond her.

"Quite hot and tiring," said Kitty suggestively. "How beautifully cool it looks inside!"

"Does it?" said Michael. "It's nicer out."

"That depends," said Kitty with a toss of the head.

Michael said nothing. He seemed to be waiting for her to take her departure, but Kitty was too well bred to credit him with so crude a manoeuvre. She assumed a conversational attitude.

"Quite a wonderful harvest this year," she remarked.

"Moderate," said Michael.

Kitty looked arch. "I suppose that is really high praise," she observed.

"It's the truth," said Michael.

"I think you're all very hard to please," said Kitty.

Again Michael said nothing.

She peered beyond him into the little bare office. "And this is where you do all your accounts and things! What a thrilling little place! Is anybody ever allowed inside?"

"There's nothing to see," said Michael.

She gave him a laughing glance. "I'm sure there must be. Heaps of ledgers and things. And a typewriter. I love typewriters, don't you?"

"Not specially," said Michael.

"Oh, I do. They make such a friendly noise, and then that dear little tinkle at the end"—she made a whimsical gesture—"just to keep one's attention from wandering! It's really a wonderful invention. I'd love to be a typist. Doesn't Dona love it?"

"I don't know," said Michael.

"I should think she does. She ought to," declared Kitty.

"Do let me come in and try it, Mr. Conyers! It would be such fun."

But uncompromisingly Michael continued to block the doorway. "I'm afraid there's no time. I'm rather busy. And the typewriter's out of action."

"Oh, really!" cried Kitty. "What ever does Dona do without it?"

Grimly, as if driven to it, he made reply. "Dona isn't working here just now."

"Not!" ejaculated Kitty. "What is she doing then? Is she on holiday?"

"No!" Michael almost ground out the words. "She's having painting lessons from Miss Armitage at Everest."

"Oh, really!" exclaimed Kitty again. "And she never told me! I suppose she was afraid to—in case I might discourage her."

"Perhaps," said Michael.

She looked up at him rather appealingly. "You see, my father has always set his face against trying to sell sketches by amateurs. They don't go down, and they only lumber up the place."

Michael made a slow movement that had in it a hint of finality. "I don't think that is Dona's idea," he said.

"But she must want to sell them!" protested Kitty. "Nobody ever attempted anything in that line without primarily wanting to make money. And of course she always had a certain *flair* for it, if you know what I mean."

"Sorry! I don't," said Michael, with a more definite gesture of withdrawal.

"Perhaps I should have used the word 'aptitude,'" explained Kitty.

He uttered a grim laugh that slightly startled her. "Oh, yes, I understand that. Hullo! Who's this?"

The question jerked from him as a small two-seater car suddenly whizzed into the yard.

Kitty looked round sharply, and in a moment recognised Garth, who brought his car to a standstill with the abruptness of one accustomed to waste no time.

Michael moved forward to greet him as though Kitty had ceased to exist. "Hullo! You, is it? We didn't expect you to-day."

Garth descended. His pale face wore its usual supercilious, semi-contemptuous expression. "I was sent for in this direction, so came on for the night. Don't let me intrude! I'll go and find the mater."

"You're not intruding," said Michael stolidly. "I'll come with you."

"Oh!" said Kitty, joining them. "Perhaps I'd better go."

Michael glanced at her. "You came to see Dona, didn't you?" he said. "I'm afraid she isn't here."

Garth bestowed a more detailed attention upon her. "I think I've met you before, haven't I?" he said. "Weren't you the lady who won the prize for Dona's table-decoration at the Show?"

Kitty coloured furiously. "No, I didn't!" she responded flatly. "And I'll thank you, Dr. Repton, to keep your nasty insinuations to yourself!"

She turned with a toss and departed as swiftly as dignity would permit, while Garth uttered a half-suppressed laugh and looked at Michael.

"Aren't you going to take up the cudgels in her defence and compel me to apologise?"

Michael made the sort of movement that one makes to brush away a fly. "She's quite capable of defending herself, I think, when necessary. Come on in!"

But Garth drew back. "No. I think I shall go to Everest first. How are things progressing there?"

"I've no idea," said Michael.

His brother laughed again. "Wise fellow! I've never yet seen you mix yourself up with other people's concerns. Hence your success in life!"

"Or otherwise!" said Michael bluntly.

"Or otherwise," agreed Garth. "Well, so long! Tell the mater not to worry! I shall be in some time."

He sauntered away with the easy gait of a man at leisure, and Michael, after the briefest pause, turned back into his empty office.

Strolling through the orchard in the misty gold of the autumn sunshine, Garth looked about him with a certain complacent satisfaction as though everything in life were turning out according to plan. It was partly cultivated, this attitude of his, but perhaps not entirely so. For life had been extraordinarily kind to him on the whole. He had been endowed with a brilliant brain

which had already achieved an amount of success for which many older men had striven in vain, and if he had not yet attained the wealth he desired he knew it to be practically within his grasp. Pressure of work did not trouble him. He was a man of considerable endurance both mental and physical, and he never allowed himself to be flustered.

The fact that he had cured Florence Armitage of an obscure malady and that she had come to regard him in the light of a preserver without whose support she could scarcely bring herself to face life was one which turned to his advantage to no mean extent and of which he did not hesitate to avail himself. But he was in no hurry to gather the harvest that awaited his sickle. He never allowed himself to be flustered over anything. He had so often watched other people defeat their own ends by undue haste and despised them for it, and there were always plenty of less important things with which to fill in the time of waiting which might otherwise have been tedious. In fact, it might be said of him that he preferred to wait and to go slowly where there was no cause for haste, and in the particular case of Florence Armitage it amused him to watch her foiled desire and waning pride battling together. The pride had got to go under before he committed himself to anything definite, and since the issue was in his judgment quite secure, he did not greatly care how long the struggle took. He intended that his victory when it came should be complete and absolute. Just as his subjugation of Dona had left no shred of assertion or self-dominion behind where he himself was concerned, so he intended that it should be with the woman whom he had chosen to be his wife. But the means he took to gain his end were of a very different description. With Florence the battle was within herself while he merely looked on, neither encouraging nor dissuading, until her pride should be in its death-throes. When that happened, he would be ready to take the fruits of conquest, but not before. That it would ultimately happen was a foregone conclusion. Everything was shaping according to plan, and he saw no cause for anxiety. There was indeed one small factor which had not originally entered into his reckoning, but it was in his estimation of so trivial a character as to be practically negligible. That factor was Dona, and in moments of introspection he occasionally found her to be something of an irritating quantity. Nobody's child she might be, yet curiously there was

within her a certain unconscious power which he might have encountered in others but which had never before in his experience proved irresistible. Whether it were her amazing beauty or her utter abandonment to his will, he could not have said; but she was like a lotus-flower which intoxicated the senses. Resent it as he might, he could never forget her for long. She was always in the background of his thoughts—like a subtle exotic fragrance that perpetually allured him. It was not love. He would have scoffed at the idea. Neither, as he understood it, was it the physical equivalent thereto. But it was something strangely commingled of the twain, and subconsciously he had begun to avoid the thought of having to do without her. She was his in every sense of the word, his to keep, his to throw away; and of course in the end that would be the inevitable outcome. One did not expect more than temporary enjoyment from a wayside flower, however sweet. Such an indulgence could be but transient, and—to give him his due—he was not in the habit of gathering wayside flowers. They had never before attracted him; but this was one of great rarity and exceptional fragrance with which he was loth to part too soon. And this had been another reason for being content to stand and wait for the more permanent fruit he had marked down for his own. Perhaps he had already a suspicion that the elusive sweetness of the flower was in its way more satisfying than the ripe fruit would ever be.

The episode with Michael and Kitty had amused him. His feeling for his brother was largely one of condescension, and the possibility of his dalliance with village-girls was a matter of no account to him. It was enough for him that Michael's fancy had not apparently turned towards Dona, and he idly congratulated himself upon having succeeded in detaching her from too close a proximity in that quarter with such little difficulty.

That thought was uppermost in his mind as he finally reached the little thatched porch that led into The Old Cottage and raised his hand to knock on the half-open door.

CHAPTER VI

THE DECISION

IT WAS Florence who came to greet him—a Florence completely transformed and magically renewed, a being less sophisticated and much more animated than of yore. She was dressed in her artist's overall, and carried a palette in her hand.

"I knew it would be you," she said, smiling at him with an eagerness that had in it a pathetically girlish quality. "Don't come in for a moment! Dona is putting something on."

Garth smiled in answer with a light pressure of her free hand. "Does it matter?" he said carelessly. "I am a student of anatomy too."

She laughed. "Don't be so primitive! *I* matter! Where have you come from? You never told us to expect you."

"It didn't seem worth while to risk disappointing you," said Garth, his grey eyes deliberately considering her. "I have come from visiting a patient about forty miles away and thought I would pause here for the night on my way home."

"How nice of you!" said Florence. "Somehow I had a feeling that you were not very far away. I got up with it."

He made an ironical gesture of acknowledgment. "Madam, your feelings are justified. May I congratulate you upon the result of your sojourn in this part of the world?"

"You may indeed," said Florence, slightly flushed. "It has done me an immense amount of good. If only the winter were not so near!"

"But you are going away for the winter," he said.

She made a faint grimace of distaste. "I suppose I must—if you say so. But I'm dreading the thought of it."

"But why?" said Garth; then, as she looked at him: "All right. You shall tell me later. Let me come in now and see whether restored health has brought about restored inspiration!"

She turned to lead the way and he entered behind her. The arrangement of the interior of The Old Cottage had been altered somewhat since the day on which Garth had first brought her

thither. There was now a draped dais at one end, and a large square of dimly-coloured tapestry covered the wall beyond it. A couch had been added and one or two chairs, and the divan was piled with gay cushions. There were rich Persian rugs on the stone floor and on one of them the tortoise-shell cat, Polly, lay curled in a sinuous circle of supreme content. There were two easels, one of which stood near a black Japanese screen, while the other, at which Florence had obviously been working, had been drawn forward almost into the centre of the studio and had a high stool before it.

Garth threw a cursory glance around and went straight to it. "I suppose I may look?" he said.

There came a faint exclamation of dismay from behind the screen towards which Florence immediately and very definitely addressed herself.

"You can put your things on and go, Dona. I have done enough for to-day."

Garth stood before the unfinished picture and pursed his lips in an inaudible whistle. It portrayed a girlish unclothed figure on the edge of a marble pool, turned away on the verge of flight, but looking backwards, while in the centre of the pool, half-veiled by the spray of a tall fountain, there appeared a grotesque image of Pan just waked to life and in the act of springing forward towards the intruder. The picture was in a crude, still elementary state, but it contained certain raw qualities which made it arresting. Garth remained for many seconds gazing at it before he spoke.

"Where on earth did you get this from?" he asked at length.

"Dona showed me the pool, and I made some rough sketches," Florence spoke carelessly. If his opinion held the faintest interest for her, she did not betray it. She picked up a gold cigarette-box from a table close to her, and handed it to him. "The main thing of course has been done in the studio. I find Dona an excellent model. I think she rather lends herself to this sort of thing, don't you?"

Garth accepted a cigarette almost without taking his eyes from the picture. "It certainly is—Dona," he said slowly.

"I didn't think it would be—that sort of thing," said a distressed voice behind the screen.

Florence laughed. "My dear, outraged modesty is out-of-date—as I think I have told you several times before. Let us have

done with such humbug! Be proud of your beauty instead of wanting to hide it! Don't you agree?" She shot the question at Garth through a cloud of smoke.

His reply was deliberate. "Up to a point, yes. I must say I think you have struck lucky."

"Thanks!" said Florence. "I think so too. In the meantime, in accordance with my promise, I am doing my best to impart the rudiments of the craft to Dona. You can come in for a lesson tomorrow if you like," she threw over her shoulder, "after Dr. Repton has gone."

A low moan was all that she received in reply, and Garth turned slowly from his contemplation of the picture and regarded the screen instead.

Florence made a confidential gesture and touched his arm with her finger. "She may be a little tired," she said in an undertone. "It has been a trifle strenuous to-day, but it won't be again."

Garth continued to look at the screen, ignoring her touch, and at length without warning he moved with the quiet purpose habitual to him, approached the screen and calmly pulled it to one side. The light streamed into the corner, revealing Dona half-dressed, crouched in a low chair with her face hidden in her hands.

Florence uttered a sharp exclamation of vexation. "For goodness sake, child," she said, "get dressed and go home! You're probably wanting your tea or supper—or whatever you have at this hour."

Dona made a small instinctive movement to obey, and then she lifted her eyes to Garth—wonderful eyes that burned with an anguish of supplication in her pale face.

He bent over her and lightly patted her shoulder. "I think Miss Armitage is right. You've been posing a little too long. Put on your frock and run home!"

His tone was kindly and very practical. Dona made a further effort and succeeded in rising, but she swayed unsteadily on her feet. Her lips were white and quivering. She stood before him in dumb submission.

"Oh, don't be ridiculous!" said Florence in the background. "Do pull yourself together! You never told me you were tired, or I would have released you long ago."

"She'll be all right," said Garth quietly, and he spoke with his

eyes fixed upon Dona's in a gaze of steady and dominating command.

In response to that look, as though indeed animated to action by it, Dona slowly moved, picked up the light cotton frock that hung on the back of the chair and with a trembling sigh lifted it to slip it on. He took it from her and put it over her head. It fell loosely around her slim young body, and her bare arms dropped to her sides.

"That's better," said Garth. "Now get out into the sunshine and trot back to the Mill! You're cold."

She was cold, shivering from head to foot as if in an ague. He took her firmly by the arm and led her to the open door.

The golden sunshine met them, but Garth did not linger. He put her gently forth and returned.

"You mustn't let her overdo it," he said.

Florence faced him with a frown of annoyance. "My dear Garth, I assure you I have been most particular not to keep her too long in one position. Really, I think she must be lacking in stamina or something. I thought these village girls had more grit."

"Dona is scarcely a village girl," said Garth.

"True!" She uttered a short laugh and turned back to her easel. "She is doubtless the result of one of Peregrine's escapades. She has at least the nucleus of his talent, but whether it will develop in so weakly a personality is not for me to say."

"I wonder," said Garth, but he did not speak as if the subject held any great interest for him. He came to her side and stood studying the picture anew.

She threw him a questioning glance, but he made no response of any sort, and at length with a slight gesture of weariness she turned aside and went to the couch.

"You're tired," said Garth.

She lay back, her long gold cigarette-holder between her fingers. "Beyond words," she said.

"Then you're working too hard," said Garth.

"I can't help it." Her eyelids were half-closed; she watched him from beneath them. "Better to be tired than bored."

Garth moved slowly backwards, still staring at the picture. "It's no good my ordering a rest-cure if you don't rest," he said.

"I don't want to rest," she said perversely.

He stood again in silence for so long that she changed her

attitude at length with what was almost a movement of exasperation and began to examine her cigarette as though he had ceased to exist. And still many seconds passed before he came out of his reverie.

Then with the calmness of one who has finally decided upon a definite plan of action, he quitted his stand before the easel and came to her.

She looked up at his approach with an involuntary hint of nervousness. There was a faint smile on his thin lips that was not without its cynicism.

"Well?" he said. "So you won't rest at home and are dreading the thought of going abroad! Now tell me why!"

She stirred on the couch and made room for him beside her, but he did not avail himself of the tacit invitation. He remained looking down upon her with his cool insistent scrutiny.

She did not attempt to meet his eyes, but she did make a valiant effort for a time to ignore them. But Garth was not in a mood to be ignored. He bore down her resistance with steady, indomitable pressure.

And at the last, quite suddenly, she capitulated. She turned her face away from him.

"Oh, go away!" she said desperately.

He did not move, and almost immediately her hand came out to him and she spoke again with her face averted.

"No! I didn't mean that. Stay—stay!"

He took her hand and held it. "Do you mean that either?" he said.

She swallowed hard; it was the last remnant of her pride. "Yes. I mean it. I love you. There!"

He bent over her. There was no ardour about him, but there was absolute mastery. He was one of those men whose ascendancy over women is quite inexplicable even by the victims thereof.

Slowly, as though in answer to an unspoken command, she turned towards him. Her face was deeply flushed; her eyes flickered uncertainly as they met his. He took her chin and held it until, involuntarily, they closed under his look. To her it was a moment of almost unbearable suspense, to him it was one of quiet triumph that held but little in the way of gratification since it had been a foregone conclusion.

Very calmly and without rapture he stooped at length and

kissed her, and she sank back quivering on the cushion as though she could endure no more.

"Thank you for telling me," said Garth. "I have wanted to know for some time."

"You did know," she protested, opening her eyes upon him with a trembling smile.

He patted her cheek. "Well, I may have had my suspicions, but the spoken word is more satisfactory. I suppose you realise that I haven't much to offer in the way of worldly goods and that sort of thing?"

"What does that matter?" she said. "You know I have far more than I want."

He smiled cynically. "So you have always told me!"

"It's quite true," she said.

He made an airy gesture. "I take your word for it, my dear. And when do you want to be married?"

Florence choked a little. It was not her idea of love-making, but she adored the man too much to be hyper-critical in this respect. In fact, she would have been bitterly disappointed had he followed more commonplace methods.

Her hand still lay in his and she pressed it a little closer as she answered. "As soon as you like."

"The sooner the better?" suggested Garth, still looking cynical.

She laughed rather tremulously. "Well, yes, of course. But don't rush me too much! I must make a few preparations."

"Do you want to finish your picture first?" asked Garth.

"Oh, that! No, indeed!" She swept the suggestion aside as of no importance. "I can bring that up to town and finish it any time. I really don't need a model any longer. I have got the main idea which is all that matters in a fanciful production of that sort."

"And what about—Dona?" he asked deliberately.

"Oh, I can compensate her. I'll give her that miniature of Peregrine's. That will more than meet the case." She spoke impatiently as though tired of discussing trifles. "I shall pack up at once and come to town. You'd like me there, wouldn't you?"

Was there a hint of unconscious pleading in her voice? Did she sense the hollowness of this gift that she had so earnestly desired now that it was within her grasp?

His hand upon her head was reassuring. "Yes, my dear, yes. But—as you say—there's no need to rush things, and it will only tire you. Come up in your own time, and then we can discuss future plans at our leisure!"

He sat down on the couch beside her and stretched a leisurely arm along the back.

She laid her hand upon his knee. "Well, you're not going to send me off now all alone on a voyage round the world, are you?" she said.

He took the hand into his own. "No," he said kindly. "I'll come with you. It will be a good beginning. We will have a very quiet wedding immediately before we sail. I am sure you object to fuss as much as I do."

"Oh, indeed I do!" said Florence fervently. The very thought of such a possibility in connection with this very deliberate suitor of hers made her shrink.

"Quite so," said Garth. "I also object to empty congratulations, and so I think we will keep the engagement to ourselves until the wedding is an accomplished fact. Do you agree?"

"Of course I agree!" She laughed rather nervously. "I am not a child. The affair is no one's business but our own."

"I thought you would take that view," said Garth. "I see no reason for entertaining the rest of the world with the story of our intentions. I am at a stage when a six months' rest will do my career no harm, and I shall not publish the fact that I am taking one until I am ready to go."

"I think you are very wise," said Florence.

He smiled at her. "I hope so. I like to discuss my affairs very fully with myself before I arrive at a decision."

"And you had decided that you would like to marry me?" she hazarded, with the woman's age-old yearning to hear some word of tenderness from the beloved.

His smile dwelt upon her indulgently. "My dear Florence," he said, "will it surprise you to know that I arrived at that decision a considerable time ago?"

"Oh, did you?" Her pale face flushed again. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He made a magnanimous gesture. "For two very ample reasons. You were my patient, and—you were an heiress."

She turned to him impulsively. "Oh, but isn't that kind of

scruple very old-fashioned nowadays? If you care for a person very deeply, surely nothing so superficial need stand in the way of letting that person know?"

There was a quiver of feeling in her voice and a corresponding measure of restraint in his as he made reply. "My dear, everything is a question of degree and expediency. If I had allowed myself to be impetuous, I might have failed to attain my end. I am sorry if I have kept you in suspense, but I venture to think that my caution may have helped you ultimately to know your own mind."

"You are absurd!" declared Florence. "I have always known it. I should have been much happier if you had only spoken before."

Garth laughed a little. His grey eyes had a gleam of rather cruel satisfaction as they surveyed her. "You see," he explained smoothly, "I thought it better that you—not I—should be the one to speak."

"But why—why—why?" said Florence. "I might never have screwed myself up to it."

"Oh, yes, you would," he answered. "And it was far better that you should."

"You still haven't told me why," she protested.

"Haven't I?" He suffered his arm to slip behind her with a negligent movement. "I thought I had. But if you want another reason, shall we say that when the woman speaks her mind it is usually quite irrevocable?"

She leaned against him with a sigh, vaguely realising that this was as much as she could hope for. "Well, it's certainly that," she said, "so far as I am concerned."

"I shouldn't have allowed you to speak," remarked Garth, "if it had not been."

CHAPTER VII

THE CAPTIVE

IT WAS after nine o'clock when Garth presented himself at the Mill House, and Mrs. Conyers had cleared the table of all but a bottle of whisky, a jug of water and some glasses.

She was seated on one side of the hearth where a low fire burned, knitting a stocking for Michael, and he was on the other, smoking his pipe in the silence habitual to him, gazing with bent brows at the dull red coals.

Garth entered with his customary leisurely precision and looked about him with a faintly expectant air.

Michael stirred and spoke. "I thought you would probably dine at Everest. Help yourself!"

Garth moved round the table to his mother who had looked up at his approach with grave welcome.

He bent and kissed her. "You didn't wait for me, I hope? I am only here for one night so I had to give Miss Armitage the lion's share."

"No, we didn't wait," said Mrs. Conyers in her quiet voice. She was as calm in her own way as was Garth, but there was nothing studied in her calmness; it was perfectly natural. "Sit down, won't you, and get warm?"

There was another chair beside her which she indicated. But Garth did not avail himself of it. He stood on the hearth instead, deliberately surveying them both.

"Miss Armitage is talking of returning to town," he remarked presently.

"Glad to hear it," said Michael curtly.

His brother at once made him the object of his exclusive attention. "Any special reason?" he enquired.

Michael drew in a long breath of smoke and slowly exhaled it through his nostrils. His pipe was nearly empty. "None worth mentioning," he said.

Again Garth cast a slow glance around the room which finally alighted upon his mother. "Where is Dona?" he asked.

Her quiet eyes met his. "Dona is not quite the thing," she said, "and has gone to bed."

"I thought she wasn't." Garth spoke as one whose professional convictions had been confirmed. "She looked fagged out at the studio this afternoon. I'll go up and have a look at her."

Mrs. Conyers laid aside her knitting and prepared to accompany him, but he checked her.

"No. Don't you come! I always prefer to be alone with my patients—girls especially. I'll go up and see her. I shan't be long."

"She may be asleep," said Mrs. Conyers.

"In that case I shan't wake her," he rejoined, strolling to the door.

He reached it, opened it, passed out, still without hurry or any suggestion of aught but professional alertness. His feet as he mounted the uncarpeted oak stairs were quiet and firm as though they were ascending the steps of a hospital. He passed along the passage that led to Dona's room and knocked lightly upon her door.

No voice answered him, but he did not knock a second time. Deliberately he opened the door and entered, closing it behind him, just as he had closed it years before when she had been a child, lying there quivering and ashamed at his coming.

But this time he went into a room that was lighted only by the rays of a full moon.

"Dona!" he said.

Her voice answered him from the bed which was drawn close to the window. It sounded half-eager, half-frightened. "Oh, Garth! Is that you?"

He came to the middle of the room and stopped. "Light a candle!" he said.

"I'm afraid—there isn't one," faltered Dona. "The moon was so bright."

He moved slowly to the bedside. She sat up at his approach, sat up and stretched out her arms to him with a tiny muted cry of entreaty.

He bent down to her. "D'you know what I've come to say to you?" he said.

Her hands clung to him beseechingly. "No—no! You're not angry, are you?"

"Not in the least," said Garth; but he did not yield to those clinging hands, he merely allowed them.

"I didn't mean to be—foolish—in the studio," whispered Dona. "Only—you came so suddenly—and I wasn't prepared."

"You needn't fret about that," said Garth. "As a matter of fact Miss Armitage won't need you much more. She will be returning to London very soon."

Dona uttered a faint moan and hid her face against his sleeve. "Then I shan't see you any more," she murmured.

"That of course depends upon circumstances," said Garth. "But when we do meet, Dona, I want you to realise that there must be no more of this sentimental nonsense. It has gone quite far enough, possibly a little too far, but it was never intended to be permanent. Now, is that quite understood?"

She made no answer in words; only her hands clung faster and faster.

After a considerable pause, he put his hand upon her head and turned it back so that her face was lifted to his.

"I think it always has been understood," he said, "whether you admit it or not. Now I am going to say good night and good-bye. And you are going to be a sensible girl and let the past bury itself."

But still her hands clung to him and her parted lips mutely besought. He bent at length to kiss them; he would scarcely have been human had he refrained. And then the next moment she was in his arms, cleaving to him with broken murmurs of adoration, throbbing like a captive bird in his hold.

"This is nonsense" he said, "nonsense!" Yet he gathered her closer to him with the words, overpowered by that elusive foreign charm in her to which he had never been able to give a name, but which held him like a magnet.

"It won't do," he said. "It won't do." And still he held her because he could not let her go.

Thus had it been with Carlo long ago when the empyrean gates had opened to him and he had found himself a slave where he had thought to walk as master.

There came a slow step, a steady insistent knock upon the door. "I have brought you a candle," said Mrs. Conyers from without.

Garth was half-way across the room before the door opened. He met his mother on the threshold.

"Thanks!" he said, smiling at her. "I was just coming to ask for one. But the moonlight was almost enough. Come in and look at her! I don't think there's much wrong."

Mrs. Conyers came into the room, shielding the candle-flame from the draught. She reached Dona's bedside and looked down upon her.

Dona's eyes, immense, burning with a strange fire, gazed upwards, but not as though they saw the homely face above them. They seemed to be staring far beyond into an infinite distance, beholding a receding vision. Her face was deathly pale.

"My dear!" said Mrs. Conyers, bending.

Instantly the far look vanished. It was as if a veil fell suddenly, obscuring that far horizon, dimming the fire. Dona smiled at her faintly—a smile in which her eyes had no part.

"I am quite all right, dear Mrs. Conyers," she said, "only tired. I shall soon be asleep."

"Just a tonic," said Garth. "I'll leave you a prescription. Thanks, Mater!" He took the candle from her. "I don't think I need go any further. I quite see what is wanted. It's nothing to worry about. She's just a little run down, that's all."

"No doubt a tonic would do her good," said Mrs. Conyers.

"Yes. Well, you see that she takes it!" He laughed easily. "That's all, I think. Good night, Dona!" He stooped and took her hand, then for several seconds felt her pulse. "Yes," he said finally. "Exactly as I thought. You must feed her up, Mater, and make her take plenty of fresh air as well. We'll leave her to her night's rest now. The sooner she gets to sleep the better."

"Let me make you comfortable!" said Mrs. Conyers, drawing up the bedclothes.

Dona was lying absolutely passive; her eyes were half-closed. "I shall soon be asleep," she said again.

Mrs. Conyers bent lower and kissed her forehead. "That's right, dear," she said tenderly. "And I shall leave my door open to-night in case you are wanting anything."

"I shan't want anything," murmured Dona.

"There's no necessity for that," said Garth.

Mrs. Conyers stood up slowly. Her portly figure had a dignity that was in its way imposing. "I shall leave it open all the same," she said. "I'll feel easier for knowing that I am within call."

Garth gave the slight shrug of the man who knows the futility

of attempting to convey reason to the feminine mind, and turned aside. "Well—good night to you both!" he said, and was gone.

There came the sound of his leisurely feet descending the stairs, succeeded by that of his calm voice making some casual remark to Michael.

And Mrs. Conyers laid her hand upon the golden head on the pillow with a motherly, protecting touch. "Sleep well, my lamb!" she said. "God bless you!"

CHAPTER VIII

MARKET VALUE

"WELL, you are a stranger!" exclaimed Kitty Frobisher, and after a moment's pause spent in surveying her visitor: "What ever have you been doing to yourself?"

"Nothing," said Dona.

She returned Kitty's kiss in the conventional spirit in which it was proffered and sat down in the little upstairs sitting-room over the shop with the slack movement of physical weariness.

"Well I never!" said Kitty, still staring at her. "And here have I been wondering and wondering for weeks! You're looking awfully queer, my dear. Have you been darkening under your eyes?"

"No," said Dona, leaning back. "Am I very ugly?"

"Ugly!" Kitty laughed good-humouredly. "You ugly! Don't be silly! How's Michael?"

"Much as usual, I think." Dona's eyes wandered to the window and rested upon the village square with its little grey church set apart among yews on the further side. "I don't see much of him. He's always busy."

"Oh, you're not helping him then!" said Kitty with a tinge of relief.

"Why, no! I work at the studio. I thought you knew," said Dona.

"I knew you were artist's model to Miss Armitage. Everybody did," remarked Kitty. "And I must say a good many people were rather surprised at your doing it." She paused.

"Were they?" said Dona, without looking round.

"They were." Kitty was emphatic. "But I naturally thought it would come to an end when she left."

"It did," said Dona.

Kitty regarded her with sudden keen curiosity. "My dear, do tell me!" she said. "Did she really paint you with absolutely nothing on?"

Dona made an odd gesture, as though she were pushing down a

small insistent terrier at her side. "She gave me lessons too," she said. "And now she has given me the use of the studio for the whole winter."

"I say!" said Kitty, impressed. "And what do you do there?"

"I am painting a picture," said Dona.

"A picture! My dear, are you really? What's it of?" said Kitty.

"It's a portrait," said Dona.

"A portrait! Who of?"

Dona hesitated for a few seconds, finally speaking with something of an effort. "I think it is a portrait of—my mother."

"Your mother!" ejaculated Kitty. "Not—you don't mean—Mrs. Conyers?"

"Oh no, I don't," said Dona. "I've never thought of her in that light—though I love her very much. No, this is someone quite different. This—must be the woman—Carlo—loved."

She uttered his name with a new reverence, as though it had come to mean more to her of late. Kitty gaped in sheer astonishment. She looked at Dona as if wondering whether she had taken leave of her senses.

"But, my dear, how ever did you get hold of her? She isn't here—in Cragstone—is she?"

"Oh, no!" said Dona. "I am taking it from a miniature that Carlo once did and gave to Miss Armitage. He didn't think it was good, but I think it must have been. Anyway, I love it. And I am trying to turn it into a big picture."

"What an extraordinary idea!" said Kitty. "But what makes you think it is your mother?"

"Because it is like me," said Dona simply. "And because—I'm sure now—that Carlo was my father."

"Good gracious!" said Kitty. "Well, of course there's a good deal more in that. I've thought the same myself before now. But—but—was he ever married?"

"I don't know." Dona spoke somewhat absently. "There's nothing to go upon. And of course I don't know for certain that this is my mother. Only—I feel that it is."

"How extraordinary!" said Kitty. "Well, I'm sure I hope they were married. I wonder when she died."

"Yes. I wonder," said Dona, and dropped into silence, still

gazing out at the quiet village green with the red November sun throwing its last dim rays across it.

"And you don't know who she was or anything?" enquired Kitty after a brief pause for digestion.

Dona shook her head. "Carlo never told anyone about her. I only knew that there was somebody whom he once loved. I was too small to understand—then."

"Well, one lives and learns," said Kitty tritely. "It's all very interesting, and I should like to come and see your picture."

"It's only half done," Dona said. "Some of it is very difficult. I try and dream of her so as to get it right. The miniature is so very small."

"It's rather clever of you to think of it," said Kitty. She looked again critically at her friend. "You look as if you've been doing more dreaming than was good for you. And I was beginning to wonder if you were ever coming near me again."

"I know. I'm sorry," said Dona. "Mrs. Conyers told me I ought to come. I hadn't realised how long it was."

"It must be five weeks ago," said Kitty. "I went round to the office to look for you, and only Michael was there. He was too busy to ask me in. And then Garth turned up. How is Garth, by the way?"

She shot the question somewhat abruptly, and Dona's hand clenched suddenly upon the arm of her chair as though at a sharp dart of pain. She answered rather breathlessly, but with scarcely a pause.

"He hasn't been down since. I think he is very busy. People get ill as soon as the winter comes."

Her voice had an unwonted, dreary note, and Kitty gave her a keen glance. "Well, don't you go and get ill yourself!" she said practically. "You're not looking any too fit."

"I'm all right," said Dona. "Tell me about yourself! What have you been doing?"

Kitty smiled and tossed her head. "Oh, I'm getting on all right, thanks. Jim Wallis and I won first prizes at a whist-drive the other day. He seemed to think it entitled him to ask me to go out on his motor-bike last Sunday, but I said No. A combination or nothing for me!"

A flicker of amusement crossed Dona's face. "And what did he say?"

Kitty tossed her head again. "My dear, I didn't listen. I often wonder why Michael doesn't buy a car. I'm sure he can afford one."

"We've got the pony," said Dona.

"The pony!" scoffed Kitty. "He'll fall down dead one of these days. He must be at least twenty."

"What did you get for a prize?" asked Dona.

Kitty sniffed. "Oh, the mouldiest thing—a cruet! I do think this village is the limit in some ways. What ever is the good of a cruet to a girl like me?"

"It may be useful when you marry," suggested Dona.

"Rot!" said Kitty tersely. "As if he wouldn't have everything already!"

"He?" said Dona.

"Oh, don't be so inquisitive!" said Kitty with a laugh. "It's not Jim Wallis anyway."

"I should think not!" said Dona.

Kitty veered instantly. "I don't know why you should be so emphatic about him. He's quite a nice boy—takes a very friendly interest in you too. And I must say his prospects are not too bad and so on. They say his old father is worth quite a lot of money. I should think he'll be every bit as rich as Michael one day."

"Would you like to be rich?" asked Dona.

"I'd adore it," answered Kitty promptly. "Mind you, I wouldn't stick at beginning in a small way. I'm not unreasonable in my ideas. But I certainly should prefer a man with prospects, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, yes, I understand," said Dona.

"Of course," continued Kitty dispassionately, "we have to realise—you and I—that our own market value won't appreciate as time goes on. In my opinion every girl ought to make some sort of bargain for herself before she's twenty-five, because she can't expect much afterwards. Men are creatures of fancy, and there are always plenty more coming along. You can't expect to be the *belle* of a place for ever. My advice to you is—and it's what I say to myself too—don't leave things too long! There's only one spring-time, and if you want a decent harvest to follow you must get up early and make the most of it."

"I expect you're right," said Dona who had heard this extremely matter-of-fact type of discourse from Kitty before.

"I'm sure I'm right," said Kitty, with comfortable confidence. "So don't you waste too much time over painting pictures, my dear—anyhow for the present! There'll be time enough for that later on. But you've got to live first."

It was the most oracular pronouncement that she had ever made, and it ought to have extracted some meed of appreciation from Dona; but she only sat still gazing over the village-green with her beautiful eyes half-veiled and the quenched look of utter weariness on her pale face.

"My word!" said Kitty. "You do look tired! It's a pity Garth doesn't come down, isn't it?"

"There's nothing to bring him down now," said Dona.

"There's his mother!" said Kitty. "You ought to get her to write to him. I would like a shot if I were in your place."

"Why?" said Dona.

"Oh, well!" Kitty paused in momentary confusion. "He'd probably give you something to buck you up. I'm sure you need it. I've never seen such a change in anyone. Why, that day of the Flower Show"—she laughed self-consciously—"d'you know I was almost afraid of you? You looked so lovely. All the men were staring at you. It made me feel quite small, I can tell you—Why, what's the matter now?"

Dona had sat up with a swift, goaded movement; the pallor had gone from her face. It was suffused with such a rush of colour that Kitty stared at her, astonished.

"What have I said?" she ejaculated.

Dona's eyes were wide and burning, like the eyes of an animal at bay. "Don't talk to me of that day!" she said, her voice quick and passionate. "I never want to think of it again!"

"Good gracious!" said Kitty. "What ever happened?"

Dona had leaned forward in her chair as though on the point of rising, but quite suddenly, as though some inner string had snapped, she relaxed and sank back, covering her face.

"My dear!" said Kitty

She was by her side in a moment, gathering her up closely, comfortingly; for her heart was extremely warm when touched. And Dona's distress was so agonised that it seemed as if mere tears could never express it. She did not weep even with Kitty's arms about her, only rocked to and fro, clutching her friend con-

vulsively in such a paroxysm of mental anguish that Kitty, notwithstanding all her common sense, was half frightened.

"What is it, darling? What is it?" she kept saying. "Oh, don't cry—don't cry!"

And yet she knew that Dona was not crying, and could not cry in this tense state of suffering.

It even seemed at first as if some physical collapse must occur before relief could come, but in the end the terrible turmoil began to subside and Dona leaned against her, gasping, as one who had come through almost unendurable torture.

"Getting better, darling?" suggested Kitty in an awed whisper. "Don't move! Just keep quite—quite still!"

She was wondering in her own mind if Dona had had a fit, and yet somehow she did not think so. Even to her by no means refined perception it was evident that she had witnessed an excess of spiritual torment such as mental disorder even of a violent description could scarcely produce. Besides, she knew Dona, and her knowledge was of many years' standing; and she had never seen her even slightly hysterical before.

She was relieved when Dona spoke at length, though she kept her face deeply hidden against her.

"Kitty, don't ever—think of this again—please! I'm so sorry—so very sorry."

"Don't, darling!" said Kitty, softly fondling the bowed head. "There's nothing to be sorry about."

"There is," Dona said. "There is. I can't tell you all about it. It began with—Jim Wallis. He was a beast to me that day."

"Was he?" said Kitty, scandalised.

"Listen!" said Dona. "He was only rough and brutish, that's all. But—since that day—I've felt quite different about life—about everything. I want you to understand—if you can. It wasn't just Jim Wallis. In fact, he doesn't count at all. It's all men. They're all the same underneath, and girls are just fools—until they realise that."

"I'm not a fool," said Kitty sturdily. "There's not a man living who'd get the better of me. I know too much for that."

"I hope you do," said Dona with a deep sigh. "Only—Kitty—remember! Men don't love as we do. They can't. They're not made to. They don't—really—know what love is—as we know it."

It means something quite different to them. Don't—ever—forget that!"

She spoke with great earnestness and slowly lifted her head with the words. Her face, all ravaged by the overwhelming emotion through which she had passed, had in it something unearthly which struck a strange note of awe in the practical Kitty.

"My dear," she said, "you look worn out. Let me get you a glass of water!"

Dona smiled a little, but her smile was infinitely sad. The fire still burned in her eyes, but it was like the reflection of a flame that consumed her inwardly.

"No, I don't want anything," she said. "Thank you for being so good to me. You know I'm very fond of you, don't you, Kitty? I want you to be happy."

"There's no reason that I can see why we shouldn't both be happy," said Kitty, kissing her. "It's a great waste of time not to be, in my opinion. And you needn't be afraid of me ever falling head over ears in love with anyone, for I wouldn't demean myself to that extent on account of any man alive."

"No, I daresay you wouldn't," Dona agreed. "You're very sensible. I only hope you always will be."

"I'm sure I hope so too," said Kitty heartily. "And now, my dear, I've got a word of advice for you. If one man doesn't come up to the scratch, just you bear in mind that there are plenty of others to choose from! Start looking elsewhere straight away, and you'll probably strike lucky before you know where you are! At least, that's my motto, and not a bad one either, if you know what I mean."

The smile still lingered on Dona's face. Kitty's self-satisfaction had always had its mildly amusing side. "Yes, I know," she said, and suddenly she put her arms around her friend and kissed her warmly. "And I'm sure you're going to be one of the lucky ones. You deserve to be."

"Oh, one never knows," said Kitty. "The luck doesn't always come to the most deserving. But I'm a great believer in being ready in case it does. Some girls are so silly; they let all their chances slip when anybody with half an eye could tell them they'll never get anything better. I'm not that sort anyhow."

"I'm sure you're not," Dona said.

Kitty got up and went to look at herself in the glass over the

mantelpiece. Her pretty, perky reflection looked back at her appraisingly. "Yes," she said thoughtfully, "I think I know my own market value fairly well. But anyway I shall keep an open mind for the present. You do the same, my dear! Don't you let yourself be upset over Garth or Michael or anybody else! Just let 'em all see you don't care a row of pins! It's much the best way."

"Yes, I'm sure it is," said Dona.

Kitty whizzed round, smiling. She had a fairly shrewd idea as to where Dona's trouble lay, but she had evidently succeeded in comforting her, so there was no more to be said. "Come along!" she said brightly. "Let's go downstairs and have some tea! I expect Dad'll be wanting his by now."

CHAPTER IX

THE COURTSHIP OF KITTY

KITTY was right. Mr. Frobisher was already in the little parlour at the back of the shop, awaiting his tea.

He was a small, round, pink man with glasses that magnified his china-blue eyes to an extent that almost made them appear fish-like. He had been pretty in his youth, very much as Kitty was pretty now, and vestiges of prettiness still lingered about him. His features were small and perky, like Kitty's, and his smile was amiable if somewhat lacking in humour. If his wife had lived, he would certainly have been wholly negligible; but as it was, he managed to hold his own in the very minute corner of the universe that had been allocated to him. He was a churchwarden, and genuinely respected in the village. At the Club of which he was a staunch supporter, his skill at billiards was considered prodigious, a fact which he gently deprecated outwardly but which inwardly caused him to swell with pride. There was very little besides that he could possibly be proud of, except of course Kitty. But then he did not regard his daughter as in any sense belonging to him. He had trained himself ever since she left school to regard her with a strictly impersonal eye, since there was no doubt that she would eventually marry and leave him. In fact, to his mind she always seemed to be on the verge of marriage. He was quite as fully acquainted with her brisk and businesslike views in that respect as was Dona. There were times when he rather regretted them, for he had it in him to be romantic, but he never dared to give rein to the tendency. If his wife had lived, it would probably have ceased to exist long since, and certainly Kitty did nothing to foster it.

"Oh, there you are!" she commented cheerily, as they entered. "Here's Dona, Dad, come to have tea with us! Isn't she a stranger?"

Mr. Frobisher corroborated the fact while shaking hands with Dona. He also was struck by something in her appearance to which he could not give a name, but the light was not very

good and he did not trust his eyes very far, so he made no remark.

"She can't stay long. It gets dark so early," said Kitty, busying herself with the teapot. "Just fancy, Dad! She's taking up painting in earnest. Miss Armitage is letting her have the use of the studio."

"Really!" said Mr. Frobisher. "That's very interesting. I believe you had something of a taste for it as a child, hadn't you?"

"I never did anything real before," said Dona. "But Miss Armitage has given me some lessons and books to study by. And when she comes back next year, she has promised to help me some more."

"I tell her she's not to spend too long at it at her time of life," said Kitty gaily. "I'm sure the things she used to do before Miss Armitage came were quite good enough for ordinary people."

"I don't think I ever saw any," said Mr. Frobisher guardedly.

"No, you didn't," said Kitty. "But I'm going to make Dona do a picture of the weir one of these days, and then I'll bring it along and show you."

"Oh, no!" said Dona quickly. "I've no ideas of that sort. I haven't attempted any landscape things for ages, and they were never any good—nothing like Carlo's."

"Mr. Peregrine had a very decided gift," observed Mr. Frobisher. "But then, he was a professional artist."

"I know he was," said Dona in some distress. "Please don't think I could ever dream of comparing myself with him!"

Mr. Frobisher smiled at her. Humility in the opposite sex always attracted him. "Don't worry yourself, my dear!" he said. "There is no need. Naturally, I am only interested in things from a commercial point of view, but if you would like to bring me one of your sketches some day, I might perhaps find a corner in the window for it—that is, of course, always provided that it seemed to me to have any potential selling value."

"There now!" said Kitty, beaming. "He doesn't say that to everyone, do you, Dad? And I never really thought he'd say it to you, Dona."

"Of course," said Mr. Frobisher, with returning caution, "what I am suggesting would have to be upon a purely business footing, and, mind you, I couldn't guarantee results. Popular opinion is very capricious. But I am always ready to do my best for a

neighbour, and I should not charge more than ten per cent on a deal. I speak, more or less, for old sake's sake. I sold a good many things for Mr. Peregrine, and it seems quite possible that you may have inherited"—he coughed abruptly—"may have acquired something of his talent. In any case, bring in one of your little sketches some day, my dear, and I shall be in a better position to judge."

"It's very kind of you," said Dona.

"Not at all—not at all!" protested Mr. Frobisher benignly. "I like to see young people with enterprise. So many of them think of nothing but dancing nowadays. And how are things up at the Mill? All flourishing?"

"Oh, bother!" exclaimed Kitty suddenly. "There's somebody in the shop. No, all right, Dad! I'll go. You have your tea!"

She gave him his cup in passing, and disappeared through the intervening door. She did not close it, however, and almost immediately her voice was heard on the other side.

"Hullo, Jim! You, is it? What do you want?"

"Oh, it's Jim Wallis!" murmured Dona with a start.

"Tell him to come in and have some tea!" called Mr. Frobisher, without rising. He was very friendly with James Wallis Senior who kept the tobacconist's shop next door.

"Yes, come on in!" said Kitty. "It's going to be cold to-night. Never mind what you came for! You can get it afterwards."

"Very nice of you, I'm sure," said Jim Wallis. He moved through the dim shop to the door by which Kitty stood and looked over her shoulder into the lighted room. "By Jove!" he said with a quick gleam in his black eyes. "Miss Celestis!"

There was nothing in his manner to betray the fact that he had watched her enter nearly an hour before, yet somehow Dona was instantly aware of it. She coloured crimson.

He passed Kitty and came forward with extended hand. They had not met since the day of the Flower Show.

"Quite an unexpected pleasure!" said Jim with a rather Mephistophelian grin.

She shook hands with him; there was no escape, but her repugnance showed in her face.

"Come and sit over here!" said Kitty, hastening to the rescue.

"And don't make a pig of yourself over the sardines!"

Jim sat down in the place indicated and proceeded to stare

Dona out of countenance while making polite conversation with his host. He had plenty to say for himself at all times, for shyness had never been a failing of his.

Dona shrank into herself and became practically silent, making no attempt to meet the bold eyes that pursued her so mercilessly. In the end Jim, satisfied that he had established complete domination in her direction, turned his attention to Kitty, and the rest of the meal was occupied by a running fire of *badinage* between them which amused no one but themselves.

To do her justice, Kitty's first plunge into the breach had been taken solely in Dona's defence, but, having launched the attack, she now followed it up with considerable relish, and the fun had become almost uproarious when Dona got up to take her leave.

Jim at once turned his insolent eyes back to her. "You going? I'll see you home."

"Oh, no, you won't," said Kitty promptly. "I'm going to do that."

"Please don't! Please don't!" said Dona. "It isn't dark yet. I'd rather go alone."

"Ho ho!" said Jim. "That sounds suspicious. I don't think we can allow that."

"Well, I must be getting back to the shop," said Mr. Frobisher, making a move in that direction. "Good-bye, Dona! Mind you come again! You're always welcome."

He turned back to help her into her coat while Kitty continued the argument with Jim.

"You're not going, anyway. If anyone does, I shall. But if Dona prefers to go alone, you can stop and have a cigarette with me."

"That's a bait!" laughed Jim. "And if I do that, what do I get for it—besides the cigarette?"

"Probably a good deal more than you bargain for," returned Kitty with spirit. "You can please yourself of course, but if you don't stay for a cigarette, I'm going to walk home with Dona."

Jim gave her a hard look with his bold black eyes, which in no way embarrassed Kitty; then he threw back his head with a loud guffaw. "Oh, have it your own way, Miss Manager! That's a good name for you, isn't it? We'll stick to that. After all, there's

only one girl in this village that's good enough to walk with, and her name is not spelt with a D nor yet a C."

"Or a K or an F!" supplied Kitty. "Thanks for the compliment, Mr. Wall Eyes! And that's a name we'll stick to for you if you don't behave yourself. Oh, good-bye, Dona, my dear! I'll look you up before long. Don't you work too hard, mind!"

She kissed Dona with good-natured warmth and saw her slip thankfully away through the shop with Mr. Frobisher.

Then she closed the intervening door with decision and turned round upon Jim Wallis.

"Just you leave Dona alone!" she said bluntly. "She's not your sort, and never will be."

Jim Wallis stared at her. Such plain speaking from Kitty was unusual. He debated with himself for a second or two whether to take offence or otherwise, and finally decided that it was not worth while.

"Oh, come off it!" he said jauntily. "You don't suppose I find that girl the least bit interesting, do you? Why, I've never seen such a change in anyone! She's lost all the looks she ever had."

"She hasn't!" returned Kitty flatly. "She's the loveliest girl that anyone in Cragstone is ever likely to see, and you know it. She may not appeal to you very much, but that's neither here nor there."

"You're right," said Jim with emphasis. "She doesn't appeal to me. Give me a girl with a little kick in her—like yourself!"

"I'm not giving you anything," retorted Kitty, moving forward to the mantelpiece, "except that cigarette I promised you. And I'm not sure that you deserve even that."

"Ho!" said Jim. "So we're on our high horse, are we? I like that—after persuading me to stay and all!"

"You didn't take much persuading," rejoined Kitty, reaching up to the high shelf to capture a box of matches. "Oh, drat it! Where's that stool?"

"Here! Let me!" said Jim. And in a moment he had whisked her off her feet and lifted her.

Kitty snatched the match-box with a half-laugh. "Put me down!" she commanded.

But Jim had bridged the distance between them in that single act and he was not inclined to beat a retreat so swiftly. He was a muscular young man, and Kitty, despite her plumpness, was not a

very difficult person to conquer physically. He received one smart slap in the face before he had her at his mercy, but after that he took such ample compensation from her full red lips that even Kitty was a little abashed by his ardour.

"Oh, do let me go, you great bully!" she panted. "Dad'll hear us in a minute."

He muted his kisses in response to the caution, but he took not the faintest notice of her entreaty; and after a further second or two of futile striving, Kitty submitted with a muffled laugh.

"Well, there!" she said when he gave her pause at length. "You've done it now, young Jim. You can't kiss a girl like that, and then ride away."

"Who wants to ride away?" whispered Jim rather thickly; he was in fact somewhat intoxicated by his victory.

"Oh, you're in earnest, are you?" said Kitty. "But I won't go out on the tail of your bike, that I swear I won't. I haven't the legs for it, and I won't do it."

"What's the matter with your legs?" asked Jim, transferring his attention to that quarter.

She took the opportunity to smack the back of his head, being actually somewhat flustered by the experience of the past few moments. "Nothing at all," she said tartly. "but they're not that sort, that's all. Oh, do let me go, Jim! I'm trowsled to death. If you want to marry me, you've just got to behave yourself, and if you don't, you can get out."

Her sound common sense was rapidly returning. Jim recognised it though he still affected to be master of the situation.

He turned and kissed her again with relish. "I'd no idea you were such a cosy little thing till I had you in my arms," he remarked. "Come now! You don't really want me to get out!"

"That depends," said Kitty, now on her feet and trying to be dignified. "If you want to marry me, it's a different matter."

"Is it?" said Jim. "Mean to say you'd marry me if I asked you?"

"I might consider it," said Kitty with an effort to extricate herself which he frustrated without difficulty.

"If everybody else failed, eh?" suggested Jim.

She frowned at him. "I don't know what you mean by that. I shall certainly marry somebody, but I'm not in a hurry—even

for you. But what I do say is: If you don't ask me to marry you after this, you're a rotter and I've done with you."

"Ho ho!" said Jim. "On our high horse again, are we?"

"No," said Kitty. "I just mean what I say, that's all. I'm particular about my acquaintances, I am."

She spoke with such evident resolution that he was impressed in spite of himself. He relaxed his hold, and Kitty sedately withdrew herself.

"It's like that, is it?" said Jim.

"Exactly like that," she rejoined firmly. "I'm not the sort of girl to be had for the asking nor yet for the taking."

He grinned a little. "It took a bit of doing, certainly," he remarked. "Regular little kicker, you are! So you're thinking of getting married, are you?"

"In due course," said Kitty.

"And you think I might fill the part?" he continued, his black eyes screwed up, appraising her.

Kitty's own eyes suddenly blazed into blue flame. "I think, Jim Wallis," she said, "that if you find yourself at the very bottom of the list, you'll be lucky!"

"Snakes!" said Jim, with a poor attempt at a laugh. "Are you putting it on, or what?"

"I'm not putting anything on," said Kitty. "But I'm very near to despising you for an utter cad—if not a blackguard!"

"Phew!" said Jim. Admiration flashed suddenly in his look. He made a movement towards her, but Kitty was on the other side of the table in a second.

She pointed to the door. "And you can go now," she said, "before I call Dad to show you out!"

Jim did not go. He stood gazing at her, receiving in exchange such a look of burning contempt that even his thick skin began to shrivel a little at last.

"Well," he said finally, "I don't know what you've got to be ratty about. You know quite well you're the only girl within ten miles I'd bother to look at twice."

"That's not enough," said Kitty, pointing loftily to the door.

He still remained facing her. "Oh, don't be silly!" he said. "What's the row about?"

"Are you going?" asked Kitty. She turned her head sharply towards the shop. "You'd better be quick. Dad's coming."

He saw an ignominious retreat before him and made an ungainly scramble for safety. "Well, but what's it all about? You're darned pretty and you know it. I'd sooner marry you than that girl at the Mill any day."

Kitty leaned suddenly towards him across the table. "You'd sooner marry me than anybody—if you're not a dirty dog!" she said tensely.

He capitulated. Somehow there was no alternative. "Oh, have it your own way!" he said. "Nice little spitfire of a wife you'll make, but, by gosh, I'll soon trim you to my liking. When's it to be?"

"What?" said Kitty, still fiercely insistent.

He grinned at her. "Why, the wedding of course! Name the day and I'll be there!"

Kitty straightened herself slowly. Mr. Frobisher could be heard moving about the shop. It was closing time.

"Well?" said Jim.

"Well," said Kitty, and turning deliberately took a box of cigarettes from a slab in the corner. "I'm afraid I can't answer you for the moment. I may have other plans. But—as soon as convenient—I'll let you know."

She held out the box to him over the table, with a perfectly steady hand.

"Well, I'm blowed!" said Jim.

He took a cigarette, and Kitty took one also and calmly struck a match. She lighted her own and handed it across to him without speaking.

While he was in the act of lighting his, Mr. Frobisher opened the intervening door preparatory to turning out the lights in the shop.

Kitty turned immediately and hailed him. "Oh, Dad, here you are! I was just wanting you. Jim has been making me a proposal of marriage."

Mr. Frobisher stood, blinking a little behind his glasses, in the doorway. "Oh!" he said with slight embarrassment but no surprise. "So that's what he came for, was it?"

Kitty seated herself nonchalantly on the edge of the table with a toss of the head and a swing of the leg. "That was it," she said. "But I haven't given him an answer yet. I can't quite make up my mind. What do you think about it, Dad?"

"Little devil!" whispered Jim inaudibly.

Mr. Frobisher gave his opinion without much pause for consideration. "You might do a good deal worse," he said.

"Yes. And I might do better," said Kitty. She threw a sudden impudent smile at Jim. "We shall have to leave it at that for the present. If I can't do better, I'll let you know."

It was spoken with such perfect amiability that in spite of his defeat Jim could not suppress his admiration.

"You are a corker!" he exclaimed. "Just a little bit of mischief, that's what you are! And if you think I'm going to be kept waiting—well, you can think, that's all."

Kitty regarded her cigarette with her head on one side. "I wonder why I took it," she said.

"Chuck it away!" said Jim. "You know you hate 'em."

Kitty made a face and threw it into the fire. "I always did like chocolates better," she said. "But I haven't got any."

Jim laughed loud and long. "Right O! I'm off," he said. "It wants a minute to six yet, so I'll be in time with any luck."

Kitty turned on her perch to wave an airy hand. "Well, if you are, you can come back to supper," she called after him.

But as the door banged on his exit, she looked across at her father, smiling shrewdly. "All the same, I shan't give him his answer to-night," she said. "That's flat."

CHAPTER X

SANCTUARY

THE GIRL who walked back through the sodden lanes to Cragstone Mill was a very different being from the ardent care-free child whom Simon Garrett had taught only a few months before. The spring had gone from her step just as the ardour had faded from her soul. She moved as one in whom the fire of life had sunk very low.

It was growing dark, and a fog was rising from the river, filling the chill air with the damp smell of water-weed and wet pastures. It would probably turn to frost before morning, but at present the ground was soft with mud and fallen leaves. Now and then her feet slipped in the mire; it seemed as if she were too tired and too dispirited to plant them firmly.

That visit to Kitty had been something of a trial. She did not know quite why she had undertaken it, except that the power to work at her picture had left her and she had found it impossible to sit in the studio any longer alone with her thoughts. Also, it was turning cold, and she had lacked the energy to light a fire.

She was ashamed now of that breakdown in Kitty's presence, and wished that she had not gone. It had cost her more in strength than she could afford to lose, and she was horribly afraid of what Kitty might think and say. Why had she allowed herself to give way like that? It was so futile and so childish, and yet she knew that she could not have prevented it. And that was a fact that scared her even more acutely. Was her endurance coming to an end—her self-control played out?

There had been times during the many night-hours of wakefulness through which she had passed when this possibility had threatened her like a nightmare, and she had lain and listened to the distant roar of the weir and wondered if before it came upon her she could, by any chance, overcome her ancient horror and fling herself in again headlong. There would be no one to deliver her now. Garth had gone his way, serene and untroubled, imper-

vious to all entreaty. Not that she had worried him much in that respect! Only one heartbroken letter had she written, begging him to be kind to her, begging him to return. A piteous note, conceived after much anxious thought, uttered as it were from the hidden depths of her soul, written—it might have been—with her very life-blood! And then his response!

He had sent her an airy message through his mother. "Tell Dona to take a good walk every day and not to spend too long playing with her paint-brushes!" That had been all. She had waited with a sick heart for more, but nothing further had come. She was still waiting, refusing to believe that it could really be his intention to make a final severance and let the past bury itself, as he had said. It could not be. Humble as she was, she could not believe that all her devotion, her adoration, her self-surrender, could mean nothing at all to him. He was bound to come back some time. She was his property, waiting to be claimed. He could not mean to throw her aside as a thing that no longer held any value in his eyes.

But still her waiting was in vain, and day by day her eyes grew heavier and her step more listless. Mrs. Conyers was very tender with her in her calm, unobtrusive fashion, but if she were anxious she did not let Dona know it. The quiet home atmosphere of the Mill House remained just the same, the routine quite unchanged. Garth's room was kept, as it always had been, in readiness for occupation at a moment's notice, and no comment was made upon the fact that he did not come. He had never been a part of their daily life, and the intervals between his visits had always been wholly irregular.

His letters were equally erratic. They usually arrived by the afternoon post, and it was possible—just possible—that even now one might have arrived for Mrs. Conyers during her absence. She had ceased to hope for one for herself. Perhaps she had never really expected that. But he might have written to his mother to tell her to expect him for the week-end. It was so long now since he had been. Surely—surely—he must come soon!

Disappointment had been hers for so long that the thought gave no impetus to her weary feet. It merely kept her moving. The way had never seemed so long before, and she had a dull wonder if her sagging energy would last out. But that faint chance of a letter made her prolong the effort which otherwise she might have

been tempted to abandon in despair. The last turn of the lane which brought her within view of the Mill lights gave her some slight renewal of strength. It was as though a beacon of hope shone out to her through the gathering darkness.

She came to the small garden-gate and found it half-open. Probably the postman had left it so! And there suddenly she paused, caught in such a wild turmoil of suspense that she had not the courage to go forward. Yes, a letter had come—somehow she was sure that a letter had come. It was as though the knowledge came at her out of the void—a bat-like, terrible thing! She knew that when she entered the kitchen, where they always spent the evening after the village-girl who came in daily had gone, she would see Mrs. Conyers sitting by the fire with a letter from Garth on the table by her side. She was certain of it, with a certainty that seemed to smite her to powerlessness. For a few moments she hung on the gate as one paralysed.

Then, with such an effort as perhaps she had never made in the whole of her life before, she stood up straight like an automaton and forced her numbed limbs to carry her up the path to the door.

It was never locked by day. She opened it and entered. There in the narrow hall hung Michael's hat and coat, so he was evidently still in the house. He usually went back to the office after tea, for there was extra work to be done now that she no longer helped. She had once voiced a faint suggestion that she should return to her old occupation in the evenings, but he had not seemed to hear her and she had not brought herself to repeat it. He had grown so sombre and abstracted of late. Or was it only her morbid fancy that had begun to see shadows everywhere?

She closed the door upon the darkening night and went forward down the dimly-lighted passage. It would have been far easier to have slipped up to her room, but she could not go without satisfying herself with regard to that letter. An inner urging was upon her which compelled.

Mrs. Conyers looked up at her entrance. She was sitting in her leather chair by the fire-side, just as Dona had known she would find her. Her knitting was in her hands, and there—on the table by her side—was a letter. Something within Dona—was it her heart?—jerked and stood still at the sight.

Michael was there also, and a faint wonder went through her, for it was later than usual for him. He was seated on the other side

of the fire, smoking his pipe, but he got up at her entrance. The tea-things had been cleared away.

Mrs. Conyers looked up. Her brow was not quite as serene as usual, a faint cloud seemed to rest upon it.

"Come in, dear!" she said. "I suppose you have had tea?"

"Oh, yes, thank you," Dona said. Her eyes fixed themselves upon the letter. She could not have withheld them had she tried.

Yes, it was from Garth—as she had known it would be. The clear precise writing lay there in the lamplight, unmistakable, almost like a challenge.

"Come and sit down!" said Michael.

She moved forward slowly. In her brain was a curious turmoil that was like an antagonism. How soon could she make them speak and tell her the contents of that letter without betraying the anguish of suspense within her? It was as though she sought to pit herself against a conspiracy of silence. There was a feeling of secrecy in the atmosphere. They knew something that she did not know. What was it? What—what was it?

She came to the chair that Michael had vacated, and placed her hands on the back of it with an unconscious seeking for support. Her eyes travelled slowly from the letter to Mrs. Conyers' face with its slightly bewildered, troubled look; but they returned again as though drawn magnetically.

And in response to that look, as though she could not help herself, Mrs. Conyers spoke. "Yes, I have heard from Garth," she said. "We shan't be seeing him again for the present."

Not seeing him again! It was like the first blow in a mortal combat—against an enemy that she could not even see. Dona stood motionless, on guard, waiting.

It came to her that she was in a sense under observation. They knew something that she did not, and they were watching, watching closely, to see what effect that something was going to have upon her. It was not a hostile vigilance—at least on the part of Mrs. Conyers. Yet it frightened her, as though somehow a net were closing about her. She had a feeling, sudden and devastating, that after to-night nothing could ever be the same again.

Then she heard Michael's voice, deep and steady. She could not quite fathom its tone. Was he trying to impart strength to her? Or was he angry?

"He's going abroad," he said.

Dona's eyes came to him. They held an agony of supplication of which she was not conscious. Her only actual thought was that this thing was bound to kill her. She could not possibly go on living—bearing her burden—alone.

"Abroad?" Somehow she repeated the word, and even to herself her voice sounded artificial, almost shrill.

Mrs. Conyers spoke again quietly, compassionately. "He has started on a voyage round the world," she said, "with Florence Armitage. They were married yesterday."

The truth was spoken, the net drawn, herself hopelessly entangled. Dona cast a single wild look around and relinquished her support as though she knew it to be inadequate. The next moment she was at the door, still facing them as one at bay, yet feeling desperately for the latch behind her.

And again she heard her own voice uttering words in a tone that shocked her. "Married!" it said. "Married! Garth—married! Didn't he know—but he must have known!—that he ought to have married—me?"

And then somehow the door was opened behind her and with a passionate cry she was gone, tearing like a hunted thing along the passage, finding the outer door, striving with it—fighting it—until somehow it gave way before her, and the night air met her, chill and damp, with the weir in the distance, roaring—roaring. . . .

Her flight was like the swooping of a bird. She never felt the ground beneath her feet. It was as though she moved on wings over the very mouth of hell. Rushing up through the cold and the dark, she felt the scorching of the flames. . . .

Now she had told them, and there was no return. By her own confession she was cast out for ever. Only the river was left—only the river! She turned along the path by the willows, instinctively heading for the spot where once she had dared to take the offensive against Garth, where he had punished her so searchingly and drastically, where she had leaped to destruction and he had dragged her back.

All that she had then endured went through her like a flash—the agonies of suffocation—the bitter, bitter cold. It seemed to smite her between the eyes, that memory—as though she encountered a glittering blade that barred the way. She could not go on. She could not face the river. Almost unconsciously she

turned from it, veering into the sodden meadow; but still fleeing—fleeing—though her feet stuck in the swampy ground, though her poor panting heart was nigh to bursting.

Vaguely now, she was struggling towards the Monolith Woods, wherefore she could not have said, save that they were dark and close, and would hide her perchance until Death came with pitying tread to bear her away. For—though the river was barred to her—Death was the only way of escape for her now. There could be no place left for her on earth. She had closed the door upon the world.

And now she was on the rising ground, and with failing strength she battled to ascend. If only she could reach the woods—only reach the woods—no one would come near her there. She could lie there in safety till she died. No one would trouble her there. No one would seek her.

But hark! What was that—in the chill and the dark behind her? A moment she hung listening, and in that moment she heard the sound of feet other than her own—feet that laboured through the mire of the riverside as hers had laboured—feet that followed with a grim persistence.

She had not expected pursuit. It came upon her like a thunderbolt. That was Michael—that must be Michael! Mrs. Conyers had sent him. But he must not find her—he must not overtake her. Why, oh why had she turned aside from the river? But for that instant of weakness, the icy depths had by now received and overwhelmed her.

With renewed effort she dashed on through the valley mist. Once in the woods she would be safe until the pursuit was over. And afterwards—afterwards—she would return to the weir when no one was at hand to stop her. Why had she shrunk from it? Why had she turned aside?

And now she had reached the steeper part of the hill that was crowned by the Monolith Woods. The ground was slippery, and she stumbled often; but she dared not stop to listen. She was fleeing for her freedom. There was not a second to be lost.

But her powers were going, and fear was adding to her exhaustion. She realised that she was rapidly nearing the end of her strength. But it seemed to her that if she could only drag herself clear of the river-mist, escape would still be possible.

A young moon hung in the sky, silvering the tree-clad hill above

her, so that she saw it as through a veil—the sanctuary towards which she was urging her weakening limbs. They were beginning to feel paralysed. Yet, from the anguish within, she forced them to a well-nigh superhuman energy. Only to reach the open—only to reach the ground above the fog! The trees were so near after that. They were like a sanctuary, awaiting her. She could creep in amongst them almost without effort—if only she could drag herself above the fog.

The sound of the weir was dying away to a muffled blurr of sound behind her. The rise was growing more and more steep. Now she stumbled against a molehill, but she saved herself from falling and staggered on. And now, suddenly and appallingly close to her, she heard the heavy fall of feet that mounted the hill in her wake.

The knowledge seemed to stab her. She caught her breath with a gasping cry. A pang of sheer physical anguish pierced her, and her strength was gone.

She fell on her face, and lay like a hunted animal awaiting its doom.

But only for a brief space was the terror of the hunted upon her, for human endurance had reached its limit and her brain had almost ceased to register. The anguish was past, and darkness surged and closed about her—a darkness which she took for the sanctuary of death.

She did not know when strong arms lifted her and bore her away.

CHAPTER XI

THE ONLY WAY OUT

VERY late that night Mrs. Conyers descended the stairs and entered the kitchen where Michael sat waiting. He made as if he would rise at her approach, but she moved forward and stopped him, her hand upon his shoulder. There were deep lines of weariness upon her face, but her eyes had their own steadfast shining notwithstanding. They looked down at Michael with the unflinching calm of a spirit that had long been anchored in peace.

"She is asleep," she said.

Michael's brows were heavily drawn. He looked back at her, saying no word.

Very steadily, his mother continued. "Michael, she has told me everything. It's a heartrending story. I have feared it for some time—only it seemed almost too bad to be true, and I blamed myself for being suspicious."

Michael maintained his silence; his gaze was unvarying, almost stony, yet there was that in it which told of intense concentration.

Mrs. Conyers went on with quiet resolution. "I shall have to take her away. Perhaps if we went to London for a time people would talk less. I haven't, of course, thought out any details except that I must be with her. You wouldn't—I know—grudge me to her."

She paused and put her hand to her breast to stifle a heavy sigh that caught her unawares.

Michael spoke. "Mother, you're tired. Sit down!"

"I must go back to her," Mrs. Conyers said. "I promised I would be within call."

He stood up with an imperative gesture. "She won't miss you if she's asleep, and she's too exhausted to wake easily. Sit down! I'll heat some milk."

"There's some left in the saucepan," Mrs. Conyers said. "I'll have that if you like. Don't bother to heat it!"

But he took the saucepan and stood over the fire with his back to her while she went to her own chair and sat down.

For a space no further word was spoken; then, as though it were wrung from him, Michael asked a question.

"When did it begin?"

Mrs. Conyers, with her hands folded in her lap, made low reply.

"It was that day in August—the day of the Flower Show. Oh, Michael!" A quiver of pain went through her, and she leaned slowly forward. "Why did I ever let her out of my sight?"

He did not turn. "Was that the only time?" he asked.

"No." Her voice had the quenched quality of a distress too deep for utterance. "I can give you no details—only the barest facts. Michael, I blame myself more than I can ever say. She thought he loved her, and she will be a mother—in May."

"Dona!" It was the only word that Michael spoke, and he bent down instantly thereafter as though he would fain pretend that it had not escaped his lips.

Mrs. Conyers went on, gazing straight before her. "She has only just begun to realise it—my poor lamb. He doesn't know. She has only written to him once, imploring him to come to her. And he never answered. If he had known—oh, Michael, if he had known—he couldn't have acted like this."

Michael stooped lower over his task. His great shoulders were like the shoulders of a bull, massive strength incarnate.

Again a hard sigh forced itself upwards as it were from his mother's very heart. "It's all too late now. I have warned her often before against other men—never against Garth—I was so proud of him, I trusted him—as she did. But I might have known. O God, I might have known."

Michael turned suddenly round with the saucepan gripped in his hand. "Who could know?" he said harshly. "If you begin suspecting your own flesh and blood, why not suspect me?"

She did not answer, merely made a gesture of protest as though entreating his clemency.

He poured the milk into a cup and placed it by her side. His face also was somehow bull-like in its ferocity, but he said no more. He only turned from her and fell to pacing the room with a heavy tread, as though inaction were unendurable.

Mrs. Conyers drank the milk and then sat very still, almost as one waiting for a sign. A small wind had arisen and was wandering to and fro so that now and then a twig of ivy tapped at the window like something lost and forlorn, pleading for entrance. And

slowly the tears filled Mrs. Conyers' eyes, and dropped one by one upon her folded hands.

Suddenly Michael stopped in his walk, stopped close to her, gazing down at her with something in his look which she could not fathom.

"Mother!" he said.

She put out a trembling hand to him. "Don't mind me, my dear! I shall soon be strong again. Strength always comes for every burden."

"D'you think you're going to carry this alone?" he said.

Her eyes shone through her tears. "No, Michael, no! God is always there to help."

He held her hand in a close grasp. "Then p'raps He'll help us both," he said grimly, "for I'm going to lend a hand, too."

"You?" his mother questioned rather doubtfully; then with great earnestness. "Oh, Michael, you're not thinking of vengeance? You won't! Promise me—promise me!"

"I'm not thinking of it now—anyway," he responded sombrely. "That'll keep. There are other needs—more pressing."

Her hand clung to his. "Not now—or ever!" she said, her eyes searching his face as though they sought some means of opening a locked door that concealed something she desperately feared to see yet dared not ignore. "He is our own flesh and blood. You have said it. Michael, promise me!"

He shook his head with stern decision. "We have something more important to consider," he said. "Time is everything. Can't you look ahead and see what must be done?"

"Look ahead?" She still regarded him doubtfully; the door had not yielded to her, she did not know what lay behind.

"Yes, look ahead!" He spoke with hard insistence. "This thing is urgent. It's got to be dealt with now. It can't be left as it is."

"But what can we do?" she said, still marvelling at his mood which revealed so little, yet so urgently compelled. "I can only take her away."

"You needn't take her away," said Michael.

"But, my dear, the scandal! Who could face it? It will kill her." Mrs. Conyers' voice held a note that was half of protest and half of appeal.

Michael's hand suddenly closed almost fiercely upon hers.

"There will be no scandal," he said, "—or if there is, it will soon die a natural death. There's only one way out. Can't you see it?"

"I can't send her from me," said Mrs. Conyers, her tone low with suppressed distress. "She may have no actual claim on us; but I couldn't part with her. You mustn't ask it."

"I'm not asking it," Michael said. "I know you better than that, and you ought to know me. Can't you see the thing to be done—the only possible thing?"

"No! What do you mean?" Again her eyes searched his face with an apprehension she could not hide. "Michael, what do you mean?"

His expression remained unaltered, fixed, inexorable. "Well, of course," he said, and he spoke slowly and with weight, "there's only one thing for her now. She must marry."

"Marry!" Uncomprehendingly she echoed the word. "But—how can she marry—when Garth——"

He checked her sharply. "Oh, can't you see what I'm driving at? I should have thought it was plain enough. She must marry for respectability's sake. We're not going to have the whole damn' village pointing at her. It's the only possible way out, and we'd better face it at once."

"But—Michael—my dear—what are you thinking of?" Mrs. Conyers' voice quivered in spite of her with the anxiety she could not still. "Any man would have to be told. And what man would take her—like this?"

"Mother!" Michael bent suddenly over her and looked squarely into her eyes. "I'm the man that's going to take her. You needn't worry any more. That's settled."

"Mike!" she said. "Mike!"

Her other hand came upwards, drawing him to her. There was a light in her eyes as of the dawning of a new hope. "Oh, my dear, would you really do that?"

"I'm going to do it," he said. "Will you tell her, or shall I?"

She still gazed at him with that new light in her eyes. "Are you sure you ought?" she asked him. "What of your life—your happiness?"

He made a restless, resentful movement. "My life's my own," he said. "I'm not out for happiness."

"Oh, my dear!" she said again. "It would be my poor lamb's

salvation. But will she agree? She's so terrified of even meeting you."

"She's got to agree," Michael rejoined briefly. "I can make her if you can't."

She leaned her forehead against him for a moment. "You'll be good to her, Michael?" she said.

"I shall be—a husband to her," he answered enigmatically. And then abruptly he stooped and bestowed a curt kiss upon her greying hair. "You'll have to trust me," he said, "and so will she. But don't fret, Mother! Things'll pull round somehow."

He straightened himself and turned away ere she could make any response.

She covered her face with her hands and sat in silence for a space, while the twig of ivy on the wall outside still tapped and tapped like a small sad spirit asking for admittance.

CHAPTER XII

MICHAEL

AS ONCE long ago in childhood Dona had opened her eyes in that little bare room of hers to lie quaking and ashamed in the light of a new day, so did she open her eyes on the bleak November morning that followed her desperate flight through the meadows. The fog had given place to a cold and dreary rain, and she lay numbly watching it, listening to the rush of water in the mill-pond and wondering how she would ever summon the strength to rise and face the world again.

It was the last day in November. The trees that bordered the lane were stark, and the fields by the river had a dull look as though all vitality had been drained away. The sky was a uniform grey. And to the girl lying there with all her dreams shattered around her it was as though the sun had sunk for ever below the horizon that she knew. Curiously, her mind turned to Carlo in that hour, Carlo as she had seen him last with that mystic smile upon his lips—Carlo lying dead.

Had Carlo's world crumbled too to utter nothingness before that strange happening which had taken him from her? She almost thought it had.

He had not feared Death. He had said that it was less than the lifting of a latch. And indeed so it had seemed for him. But with her it was different. The blood was still warm in her veins, and Death meant the dark cold smother of great waters. She had dared it once, but now even in her anguish of extremity she could not dare it again. She had got to go on living somehow, somewhere, outcast though she might be.

With a shivering moan she turned in her narrow bed and hid her face from the pitiless morning light. Oh, to be at peace with Carlo, without the dreadful journey through those icy waters! Carlo had never hurt or disappointed her. Carlo had always understood. She had always been his Dona Celestis.

There came the quiet opening of the door. "Are you awake, dear?" said Mrs. Conyers.

Dona made a muffled sound of assent. She wanted to hide even from those kindly eyes now that it was day.

Mrs. Conyers came forward in her slow massive way. She was carrying a tray. "I've brought you some breakfast, darling, and I want you to eat it," she said. "I looked in some time ago, but you were still asleep."

"I can't eat anything," whispered Dona, her face almost concealed in the pillow.

"Oh yes, you can, darling." Mrs. Conyers' voice was very tender but quite matter-of-fact; there was nothing about her to show that the night had brought no sleep to her. "There now! Sit up and let me see you begin!"

Her gentle insistence took effect. Dona had practically ceased to attempt to direct her own actions. Her spirit was still smitten to the earth with shame and dismay.

She dragged herself to a sitting posture, but the sight of the food made her shudder.

"Now, dear," said Mrs. Conyers with quiet admonition, "you're going to be very brave. Nothing ever looks so bad if we stand up to it. That's what we're all going to do, and presently I'll tell you how."

She stooped compassionately to kiss Dona's death-white face, but when Dona would have clung to her she softly checked her.

"You are going to be very brave," she said again.

And Dona submitted as a person stricken with blindness submits to the guiding hand.

With difficulty she conquered her nausea, and ate and drank under Mrs. Conyers' watchful eye until the latter judged that she had had enough. Then thankfully she lay down again with the bedclothes huddled about her.

"Now, dear," said Mrs. Conyers, placing the tray on the chest-of-drawers and turning round, "I am going to talk to you. Will you listen?"

"Of course I will listen!" Dona murmured.

Mrs. Conyers came and stood beside her. "First of all, dear," she said, "I want you to realise that no one is angry with you. You have done wrong, and as often as we sin we are bound to suffer. That is God's rule, but it doesn't mean that He is angry either. He is only sorry, and the people who love you are sorry, too. Don't you understand, darling?"

"You couldn't be angry with anyone," whispered Dona.

"Not with you, certainly," Mrs. Conyers said. "And neither could Michael."

Dona flinched at the name, and a swift wave of colour rushed over her face. She put up two quivering hands and covered it. "I can't—ever—meet him again," she protested in muffled tones.

"My child, wait!" said Mrs. Conyers, laying a restraining hand upon the tumbled golden hair. "You don't know Mike. You will—some day."

"He must want to turn me out," protested Dona.

"He does not," said Mrs. Conyers. "His first thought—his only thought—is to help you—to save you."

"He!" said Dona. She looked up with bewildered eyes. "But—but—he can't do anything. What could he do?"

"I will tell you," said Mrs. Conyers. "He is going to do a thing that will save you—and the little life that is coming—from shame and dishonour."

"Oh, don't!" Dona shrank uncontrollably. "Don't! What can he do?"

"We have got to face it and be brave," Mrs. Conyers reiterated. It was as though she had said it over and over to herself so often that it now came to her lips almost mechanically. "Michael has found a way out, darling, and let us thank God that he has."

"But how—where?" Dona had begun to tremble very violently; the bewilderment in her look had turned to dread.

Mrs. Conyers stooped over her as if she would fain shelter her from every wind that blew. "My poor little lamb!" she said. "Don't be frightened! You can trust Michael; that I promise you. He is going to marry you, darling, and make things easier for you."

"Marry me!" The words came from Dona like a cry; she started up in the bed with a wild gesture as though she fought for air. "Marry me!" she gasped again, gazing round like some creature trapped and terrified.

"My dear!" Mrs. Conyers said, and would have gathered her to her heart, but Dona broke from her.

She flung herself face downwards upon the bed again, clutching convulsively at the iron rails above her head. "Oh no!" she moaned. "No—no—no!"

"Oh, hush, darling, hush!" urged Mrs. Conyers. "You don't

know what you're saying. Oh, don't cry so! You'll make yourself ill."

For such a storm of weeping had suddenly come upon Dona as shook her from head to foot. It was as if the pent anguish of the day before had found vent at last, and there was no checking it. She lay there torn with bitter sobbing which she vainly sought to stifle in the pillows, while Mrs. Conyers hung above her in impotent distress.

The piteous sounds of her crying so filled the room that neither of them heard the quiet opening of the door or knew that a third person had entered until Michael was standing by his mother's side. His dark face with its brooding look held no sign of emotion, only the brows were drawn heavily above the stern eyes.

Mrs. Conyers perceived him with a start of surprise that was not unmingled with relief. "Oh, Michael, you speak to her!" she said. "See if you can persuade her!"

He took her place by the bedside and stooped over the girl who lay there sobbing as one distraught.

"Dona!" he said.

Her whole body seemed to leap as if in answer to an electric shock. She caught her breath and buried her face more deeply into the pillow.

He spoke above her in his deep unmoved voice. "You needn't try to hide from me. You needn't be afraid. You need not even be alone with me if you don't wish it. All you need do is to trust me. Can't you do that?"

He paused. She did not answer, but her wild sobbing had ceased. She lay as still as death.

Very quietly he took her hands and unclenched them from the bed-rail. "Turn round," he said, "and look at me!"

As one compelled, she slowly turned, too weak to raise herself, yet not able to resist that simply uttered command. Her eyes, half-blinded with weeping, were lifted to his. She lay panting.

"Listen!" he said. "As soon as I have made you my wife, everything will be buried. Whatever the future holds, the past is dead and shall never rise again if I can prevent it. Do you understand? When you are my wife, I shall protect you. I shall stand between you and the world. I shall keep you—in all honour."

A quick sob came from her. She spoke no word.

He bent a little lower, looking closely into her eyes. "Can you trust me to do that?" he said.

Her lips trembled into speech. "You—ought not," she whispered. "Not you—not you!"

"That," he responded, "is my affair alone. Can you trust me?"

His hands still grasped hers with a grim tenacity that seemed to lift as well as to hold. His eyes dominated hers with a mastery against which she was powerless. A long hard quiver went through her and she surrendered.

"I will do—whatever you think is right," she said.

And Michael stood up and without another word went from the room.

END OF PART II

PART III

CHAPTER I

MARRIED

"MARRIED!" said Kitty. "Dona?—I don't believe it."

Mr. Frobisher rose from the breakfast-table and laid the local paper in front of her. "You can see for yourself," he said.

Kitty snatched and read.

"On Dec. 4th at Flexford Parish Church, by special licence, Michael Conyers, of the Mill House, Cragstone, to Dona Celestis, also of Cragstone."

Kitty looked up with goggling eyes. "Dad! It can't be true!"

"It appears to be," said Mr. Frobisher.

He looked pink and a little apprehensive, as if he were not quite sure what his daughter's attitude in the matter might be.

"Well, I'm—jiggered!" said Kitty.

"Very extraordinary," agreed Mr. Frobisher, turning towards the shop.

"Extraordinary? It's unheard of!" declared Kitty. "Why it's less than a week since she was here! And—yes, she was a bit funny that day, I remember. I thought it was Garth. Ah!" The ejaculation jerked from her. "P'raps it *was* Garth!"

"No—Michael—evidently," asserted Mr. Frobisher.

Kitty gave him a brief pitying glance. "Michael now—perhaps! I always rather fancied he was after her, only of course he is a very dull match for a girl like that. But—to get married in that hole-in-a-corner way! Well, it's the oddest thing I ever heard of. On the Fourth! That's the day before yesterday. I shall go straight round and see Mrs. Conyers."

She jumped up from the breakfast-table and began to hurl the plates and saucers together.

Mr. Frobisher betook himself to the shop without more ado. For some reason which he could not have explained satisfactorily he had been half-afraid of a scene. It was not always advisable to take Kitty by surprise.

But on this occasion she seemed to be swayed more by curiosity than any other emotion, for which he was devoutly thankful.

He heard her in the distance while he was tidying his bookshelves in the shop, "flying round" as she would have expressed it in the endeavour to crowd her household duties into a smaller space than usual, and he showed no astonishment when she burst through the sitting-room door a little later wearing the hat and coat which were always donned for visiting. She was a little breathless, but by no means flustered, and again he was vaguely relieved to observe the fact.

She was carrying her shopping-bag which she flourished at him as she passed. "So long, Dad! I'll get what I want at Collinses' on my way back. I suppose you're going up to the Church Field this afternoon for the match."

"I daresay I shall," said Mr. Frobisher.

He never missed a football match if he could help it. Kitty on the contrary seldom attended one, despite the fact that Jim Wallis, who was a keen player, had often urged her to do so. "A messy game", she called it.

"Well, so long!" she cried again. "It's early closing, so I mustn't be late back."

"No. Don't be!" said Mr. Frobisher, turning back to his shelves.

She was a good girl, was Kitty; but he would have been much fonder of her if it had been possible to introduce a little sentiment into his affection. But anyhow he was thankful that the unexpected news of her friend's marriage to Michael Conyers had not upset her. It was strange indeed that Dona had not let her know.

Kitty's thoughts, as she trotted briskly through the village, dwelt upon the same subject, diving busily hither and thither in the search for the motive which had prompted this secrecy. She had felt sure—as sure as sure could be—that Dona's affections had centred upon Garth on the afternoon of her strange breakdown. Of course, it was looking rather high, though she herself had suggested it; but these things were only right if you brought them off. If you didn't, well, then, least said soonest mended! But one did not expect quite such a sudden change of front. And Michael too—she had never thought of him as the sort of person to make so swift a move. Certainly Michael was deep. He had probably cared for her all along, and caught her on the rebound. Yes, that was what it was. He had realised that it must be now or

never; and a small swell of indignation went through Kitty. No, she would never have thought it of Michael.

It was a pleasant filmy morning, though there was plenty of mud underfoot. Notwithstanding this, she turned off by the river-bridge to take the short cut to the Mill, for her curiosity was of too urgent a nature to be denied a moment longer than was necessary. Her feet slipped and slid on the wet path, and more than once she barely saved herself from falling headlong. But time was everything, and she still hastened on her quest.

She came to the low wall that bounded the Mill garden. Everything within the enclosure was in absolute order, but it held no interest for her. The house was her objective. Panting, she hurried on, rounded the curve to the gate, lifted the latch, and stopped short. She was face to face with Michael.

"Oh!" she gasped.

He stood on the ash path looking at her. Evidently he had watched her approach, but she had been too absorbed to observe him.

"Good morning!" he said. "Come in, won't you?"

Michael taking the initiative—Michael actually trying to be cordial—was a spectacle so unusual in itself that Kitty was too staggered to display her customary self-complacence. She looked up at him with a crimson face. "Well, this is a surprise!" she said.

"What is?" asked Michael.

She made a fussy attempt to recover herself. "Why, meeting you. I thought—I thought you'd be away."

"Why?" said Michael.

If she had not known him to be completely devoid of all humour, she could almost have believed that he was playing with her. As it was, incredulity of the whole affair took sudden form within her.

"Somebody must have been having a game with you!" she said.

"With me!" said Michael, equally incredulous.

Kitty still gazed up at him with round eyes. "Oh, I wish I'd brought the paper along," she said.

"What paper?" said Michael.

"Why, the *Western Daily Echo*." She spoke very fast in her excitement. "You haven't seen it of course, but——"

"Yes, I have," said Michael. "I've only just put it down. It's in the house."

"Oh!" Kitty gasped and swallowed hard. "Then you—I suppose you've seen the announcement?"

"What announcement?" said Michael without the faintest suggestion of curiosity.

She gaped at him and swallowed again. "Your—marriage!" she managed to explain. "They say—you're married!"

"Oh, that!" said Michael. He took his pipe from his pocket and put it empty into his mouth while he felt for his tobacco-pouch. "Well, it's quite true. I am. What of it?"

What of it? No man with any brains could have asked so senseless a question. Kitty abruptly lost patience. "You really are married—married to Dona! And nobody knew of it. I'm simply amazed," she declared.

"But why should anybody know?" questioned Michael.

Kitty's self-respect had returned in full force. She lifted her head with dignity. "I think I might have been told," she said. "Dona and I have been friends for so long."

"Well, you know now, anyhow," said Michael consolingly. "And after all, it only happened two days ago."

Again curiosity asserted itself in Kitty's soul. It was difficult to maintain her dignity at the same time, but she did her best. "That's why I thought you'd be away," she said. "It's usual, isn't it, to take a honeymoon after a wedding?"

The corner of Michael's mouth which did not contain the pipe went up a very little. "P'raps we shall take one later on," he said.

"Then it won't be one," pointed out Kitty argumentatively.

He did not shift either his position or his expression. "In that case we shan't," he said.

A wave of sheer exasperation boiled through Kitty. "Well," she said, "when I am married, it'll be done properly, with bells, and all the village there to see. No hole-in-a-corner affair for me, thank you!"

"Don't mention it!" said Michael, taking out his pipe to fill.

Kitty nearly stamped, but not quite. "And my wedding isn't so very far off either, I can tell you," she asserted with flashing eyes. "And I'll have a combination to go away in for my honeymoon."

"A what?" said Michael, and then abruptly turned his back to light his pipe, thus relieving her of the necessity of explaining.

Perhaps Kitty had never been nearer to violence than at that moment; which was odd, for she was of a naturally placid habit of mind. But Michael Conyers could be insufferable at times. It was probably his lack of perception that made him so.

"Well," she said rather aggressively, when he turned back again. "I suppose I can go up to the house and see her."

"I don't see what's to prevent you," he said, "except that I don't think she's there."

"Where is she then?" demanded Kitty.

He made a vague gesture. "I think she's gone to The Old Cottage to work at her picture."

"What an extraordinary thing to do!" said Kitty.

"Is it?" said Michael.

"Well, isn't it?" She rounded upon him. "You might have been married two years for all the notice you're taking of each other!"

"How do you know?" said Michael.

She tossed her head. "Well, I shall be very sorry if the man I marry is content to let me go and paint pictures all by myself within two days of our wedding, if you know what I mean."

She added the last phrase on a faintly propitiatory note, for Michael's brows looked a little formidable. But he continued to smoke his pipe, so she concluded that if she had trodden thin ice her weight had been too light to crack it.

"No," he said at length ruminatively, "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean. I had an idea it was a free country, but—p'raps I was wrong."

Kitty felt herself colour and laughed to cover it. "Oh, you'd never understand," she said patronisingly. "I suppose I ought to congratulate you, but if I do, you'll probably ask me what for?"

"Oh no," said Michael. "I should know that you were trying to be kind, and I hope I should reply suitably."

There was nothing to be done with him. Kitty abandoned the attempt. "Well," she said, "I suppose she isn't too busy to see me. Can I go along?"

"By all means," said Michael as if mildly surprised that she should ask a second time.

Kitty waited for no more. Curiosity still simmered within her,

and to attempt for any length of time to extract information from Michael was too severe a strain upon her patience.

With a smile and a nod which completely restored her slightly damaged dignity, she passed him by.

She found the little gate that led into the orchard ajar. The apple-trees reached out their bare gnarled arms all dripping with moisture; the grass at her feet lay dank over the sodden ground. But other feet had trodden it on the way to The Old Cottage, and she followed the slender tracks with quick steps.

The studio-door was open, and she did not pause to knock. Impetuously she entered.

"Dona! Are you here?" she said.

There was a sharp movement in answer. Dona came from behind an easel. She was dressed in a pale blue overall that greatly accentuated the pallor of her face, giving her a strangely transparent, ethereal look. Her great eyes were wide and startled.

"Why—Kitty!" she said.

"My dear!" Kitty seized and embraced her. "Well, you have given us all a surprise and no mistake! I hardly know whether I am standing on my head or my heels."

"How nice of you to come!" said Dona.

She returned her friend's kiss quite readily, but with lips that were cold to the touch.

Kitty held her clasped while she patted in her congratulation. "I've come to wish you the very best. But it's the most astonishing thing I ever heard of. What ever led to it? And why didn't you tell me last week?"

Dona extricated herself, faintly flushed and trying to smile. "It was Michael's doing," she said. "He didn't want a fuss, and so I wasn't allowed to tell anybody."

"Extraordinary!" commented Kitty. "But of course he always has been a bit odd—if you know what I mean. I've just seen him—as cool as a cucumber. And you're not even going to have a honeymoon, I hear!"

"I think he spent all his spare money buying a licence," said Dona.

"Astonishing!" declared Kitty. "Well—well! And after all your dark warnings the other day! I didn't know you could be so deep."

"I hope you're not vexed about it," said Dona.

"Vexed! My dear, how could I be? You never suspected me of having any *flair* for Michael, did you?" Conscious superiority sounded in Kitty's voice. She brought out her favourite word with a very obvious vocal flourish.

"Oh no! Never seriously," Dona hastened to assure her. "He was never in the least your sort, I know."

"I'm not at all sure that he's yours," said Kitty, regarding her shrewdly. "I hope you haven't made a mistake, my dear. These things are easier done than undone."

"Don't be silly!" said Dona. She was still smiling a little, but without much mirth. "Let's sit down on the sofa, shall we?"

"And then you can tell me all about it," said Kitty. "When did he propose to you?"

Dona hesitated momentarily; then: "Kitty," she said, "d'you know I don't think I can tell you about that? It's—private."

"Oh, please yourself!" said Kitty with her chin in the air. "I've no wish to intrude on your private affairs. P'raps you may be interested to hear that I've had a proposal of marriage myself since I saw you last."

"Oh, have you?" Dona's interest was very apparent; perhaps it was mingled with relief. "Oh, Kitty, who is it? And have you accepted him?"

"Not yet," said Kitty loftily. "I don't believe in rushing things myself. It cheapens one too much to my way of thinking. No man is going to get me for the first time of asking, I can tell you."

"I daresay you're right," conceded Dona. Now that the excitement of the meeting was over, she was looking very weary, even dejected.

"Of course, dear," said Kitty complacently. "Well, it's young Jim Wallis, if you want to know. And he's never come up to the scratch with any other girl before; that I don't mind telling you."

"Jim Wallis! Oh, Kitty!" Dona's voice held dismay. "That horrible young man!"

"That's enough!" said Kitty with sharp decision. "I don't want any more dark warnings, thank you. I understand him far better than you do, and he understands me. After all, you've got married without asking anybody's advice, so perhaps I may be allowed to do the same."

"Oh, Kitty!" protested Dona. "I didn't mean—you know I didn't!"

Kitty softened instantly; she was fond of Dona. "That's quite all right, dear! There's nothing to worry about. Just you set to work and be happy! You're not looking too grand. Have you heard from Garth? What's he think of it all?"

Dona coloured very deeply, but her eyes looked straight into Kitty's as she made reply. "No. We haven't heard from him since we married—for a very good reason."

"Good gracious! What is it?" said Dona.

There was no faltering in Dona's voice as she enlightened her. "Because he has just married Miss Armitage and gone for a voyage with her."

"Well!" gasped Kitty. "Surprises will never cease! I never thought of his doing that. Did you?"

"No one ever knows what other people may do," said Dona. "But I think we might have guessed."

"Of course she's rich," said Kitty. "And I suppose she's well-born. But I shouldn't have thought Garth would have fancied her. She always seemed a bit—well, tepid, to me, if you know what I mean."

"She was very clever," said Dona.

"Clever people are seldom attractive," returned Kitty. "I should never have taken her for the marrying sort. I shouldn't think she'll have any children."

Dona shivered and got up to close the door. "They're going down to South America," she said. "Perhaps she'll get stronger there."

"My word!" said Kitty. "I wouldn't be Garth for something and that's a fact. Fancy being boxed up for weeks in one cabin with an anæmic creature like that! Well, everyone to their taste!" She paused to give Dona a shrewd look as she returned. "I don't envy her either," she declared with emphasis. "You're well quit of him, my dear."

Dona achieved a thin little laugh in reply.

Kitty's hand came suddenly forth and squeezed hers. "You've done much better for yourself really," she asserted, more to the world in general than to Dona herself. "Michael's solid anyhow. He'll make a good husband, I'll be bound. I never did take to Garth—too sneery and superior for my taste. There!" She re-

leased Dona's hand and bounced to her feet with the air of one closing an unpleasant subject. "Now show me your picture!"

"It's only a study," said Dona, "not the real thing yet."

Kitty advanced upon the easel. "Only a study!" she echoed. "My word!"

Astonishment checked further speech for the moment; she stood as if spell-bound.

The misty winter sunlight filtering in through the skylight revealed something of which the practical Kitty had never dreamed. A figure vaguely indicated, like a dream-form, met her wondering gaze. There were dim rich colours blended to a lovely harmony in the draperies; there were jewels half-hidden yet lustrous gleaming here and there against white flesh and raven-black hair. But it was the face that appealed to Kitty's imagination—a haunting spirit-face with eyes that held deep memories.

"Dona!" she said at length on a long-drawn breath. "It's you!"

"No," said Dona, and she too spoke with reverence, almost in a whisper. "It is—the woman Carlo loved."

"And you did it!" gasped Kitty.

"I feel as if it is all Carlo's work," Dona said in the same hushed tones. "When I am here alone—he comes—and holds my hand—and shows me what to do."

Kitty threw her a swift glance. "Don't! You give me the creeps!" she protested. "How could he?"

"I don't know," said Dona simply. "But he does."

"Show me the thing you're copying it from!" said Kitty.

Dona turned to the table and pulled out a drawer. "I don't leave it here at night," she said. "It's always under my pillow."

She held out an open case for Kitty to see. In it was a fair-sized miniature, beautifully executed in water-colours, of a woman robed like a queen, with ermine on her cloak and a coronet in her black hair. The face was exquisite of outline and perfect in detail, but the dream-face on Dona's canvas held something which the miniature lacked.

Kitty turned back to it with an expressive cluck. "My dear, you're marvellous. It's the very soul of you. Who on earth is she, I wonder?"

"I don't know," said Dona. "It was—Carlo's secret."

Kitty looked at her. "It must be your mother," she said.

"I don't know," Dona said again.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" said Kitty.

Dona hesitated; then very slowly, "I'm not sure that I should," she said.

"How funny you are!" commented Kitty. "But of course—now you've been and got married—it might make a difference. Do let me see your wedding-ring! Haven't you got an engagement one too?"

Dona held out her left hand with the thin gold band on the third finger. "We didn't worry about that," she said.

"I shall have a platinum one," said Kitty. "They're all the rage, and much more—distinguished, if you know what I mean."

"I don't like them," said Dona unexpectedly.

"Why not?" Kitty opened her eyes wide.

Dona looked embarrassed. "They don't seem so permanent somehow. I think that's why they're so popular."

"Well, you are funny!" Kitty commented again. "You're not really in love with Michael, are you?"

Dona stepped backwards with a sharp gesture. "Oh, don't ask me such a lot of questions!" she entreated.

"My dear," said Kitty. "Fancy being shy nowadays! You do surprise me. Well, tell me all about the house! Is it being done up for you? And where is Mrs. Conyers going to live?"

She spoke with a sincere intention of changing the subject, but Dona only looked more distressed.

"Of course Mrs. Conyers will stay!" she said. "She has much more right than I have. No, the house isn't being done up. We're not making any changes at all—for the present."

"You've surely changed your bedroom," said Kitty, curiosity getting the better of her again. "You couldn't ask a husband to share——"

She broke off. The door had suddenly swung open again. Michael's broad figure appeared in the entrance.

"Sorry to interrupt!" he said, looking across at Kitty with a faintly sardonic expression. "But my mother has just opened a cask of rhubarb wine, and she wants your opinion about it, Miss Frobisher."

"Really!" said Kitty. "How nice of her! But I don't know that my opinion is worth having."

"Come and sample it anyhow!" said Michael. "You too, Dona! It's cold in here. Why haven't you lighted the stove?"

Dona turned a flushed face towards him. "Is it cold? I'm afraid I hadn't bothered about it."

"Miss Frobisher is absolutely blue," said Michael. "Come along, both of you, and be restored!"

There was a certain grim purpose about him which admitted of no refusal. Kitty yielded with a slight feeling of being coerced, but with no sense of resentment. She had a suspicion that Michael was trying in his clumsy way to propitiate her for his previous lack of courtesy, and she was always gracious, on principle, to people who sought to make amends.

"Live and let live!" was Kitty's motto; and she had been known to add with a burst of generosity. "I generally like to give the devil his due—if you know what I mean."

CHAPTER II

BRASS TACKS

KITTY did not stay long after sampling the rhubarb wine. Somehow she was never quite at her ease with Mrs. Conyers whose quiet strength of spirit she found curiously disconcerting. She never chattered as freely in that calm presence. It made her feel trivial, even futile, upon occasion, though she herself would have described it differently. She had a great respect for Mrs. Conyers, however, and always broadmindedly said so before giving vent to any disparagement.

She parted from Dona with an airy promise to look her up again before long when she had more time.

"Which heaven forbid!" said Michael as he closed the door upon her with some finality.

Dona, who had followed them into the passage, gave him a quick look. "You don't like her!" she said.

He made an eloquent grimace. "Has she asked to see your *trousseau*?" he enquired.

Dona shook her head. "No. Oh no!"

"That'll be the next thing," he remarked grimly. "Better get one at once." He turned with her into the kitchen. "Mother, do you hear? Dona must have a *trousseau*. Will you see to it?"

"Oh no!" protested Dona again. "I've got plenty of clothes, and I can make anything I want."

Mrs. Conyers gave her a quiet look. "I think Michael is right," she said. "Just a few new things would be a good idea. I'll help you, my dear."

"What else did she want to know?" said Michael.

Dona bent over the fire with a flushed face. "Lots of things—that didn't matter," she said.

"What sort of things?" said Michael.

She made an impotent gesture. "Oh, really nothing—nothing that anyone would remember."

"I want to know what they were," he said.

Dona was silent.

"Don't worry her!" said Mrs. Conyers gently.

"P'raps I know without being told," observed Michael dryly. "Anyhow, let there be a *trousseau* before she comes again! She talks of getting married herself before long. Who's she run to earth, I wonder?"

"Now, Michael!" his mother said.

He smiled sardonically. "Sorry to be coarse. She has that effect on me. Well, I must be going." He turned to the door. "Dona, don't freeze in that studio! Get Joe to light the fire!"

She remained bent. "Thank you," she said. "I don't think I'll go back."

Michael departed. Mrs. Conyers fetched her flour-tub in preparation for making cakes. All her movements were calm and orderly. There was a definite purpose in all that she did.

Several minutes passed away and Dona did not move. Mrs. Conyers began to mix her ingredients with the careful confidence of long experience. She was not apparently paying any attention to the girlish drooping figure; yet when Dona at last slowly straightened herself, she spoke.

"Mike is very busy, trying to make up for those two days off last week."

"I'm sure he must be," said Dona with a sigh.

"He was working at the accounts till late last night," continued Mrs. Conyers in her serene voice. "And then up again before six in the morning. It's the letters that take the time."

"Yes, I know," said Dona.

"And he never was much of a hand at the typewriter," concluded Mrs. Conyers. "You might just open the oven-door for me, dear. Yes, leave it like that! And put a wrap on if you're going out!"

As the door softly closed behind Dona, she also gave a sigh, but she returned to her cake-making immediately thereafter with no sign of anxiety on her calm brow.

Dona stood in the passage outside, irresolute. She was as one emerging almost from a state of stupor. The events of the past few days had left her dazed. Since the news of Garth's marriage and departure had reached her, life had changed from a grey void into a terrible turmoil in which she had been caught and as it were flung from rock to rock—the helpless victim of an angry Fate.

Now the turmoil had died down again, and she was face to face

once more with the normal conditions of life at the Mill House. But it was as if years had passed over her, and though her surroundings were to all outward seeming the same, she herself was fundamentally changed. And it was a change that frightened her, for she knew herself no longer. Her very personality seemed to be in some fashion different. Some vital thing had gone out of her. She did not yet know what it was, but she felt as if the very mainspring of her existence had snapped. She wondered numbly how she came to be still alive, for she was almost too paralysed to suffer pain. And she was tired—tired to the very heart of her.

But that gently uttered hint from Mrs. Conyers had set her stunned mind at work. Half-mechanically she turned towards the door that led to the office. Perhaps she might be of some use to Michael. It was not fair to leave him to struggle with that accumulation of correspondence alone.

It was the first definite effort that she had made of her own accord. Till then, everything had been mapped out and arranged for her. She had been a mere pawn, passive, unresisting, sometimes bewildered, sometimes almost unaware of the direction she had been made to take. But now with the slow awakening of her senses, realisation was coming to her and the lethargy was passing.

It needed a good deal of resolution to carry her on her errand, for her instinct was to avoid Michael just then; but she did not want to be alone. Moreover, he was so exactly as he always had been that there was no tangible cause for avoidance.

He had married her; his ring was on her finger. But that strange marriage-ceremony which to her had been as a bewildering and painful dream had apparently meant nothing whatever to him. He had come to the fore in a moment of appalling stress, had entered her life almost forcibly and taken the full direction thereof, and now he had withdrawn again into the background. But for Kitty's visit, she could almost have persuaded herself that the amazing event of her wedding had been but a dream indeed.

So, slowly and reluctantly, she moved along the passage and through the door at the end that led into the yard. She had forgotten Mrs. Conyers' instructions to put on a wrap, but only a few steps separated the office from the house.

The fog rising from the river had almost obliterated the sun, and the world was dank and chill. The old familiar sounds of mach-

inery and rushing water filled the air. As a child she had loved to run across and watch the spouting stream being hurled through the sluice. It had always fascinated her. Sometimes she would lean on the railing and drop in leaves and twigs to watch them being whirled swiftly away.

But to-day she turned from sight and sound with a suppressed shiver. It was terrible to think of anything being swept along at the mercy of a relentless current.

The office-door was ajar. Timidly she pushed it open and entered. The sound of the rushing water and the pounding of the mill sank behind her to a dull throbbing. Softly she shut it out.

Michael was sitting at the old worn writing-table. Letters and papers were littered around him. The typewriter was pushed to one side.

"Can I come in?" Dona said.

He looked round with a start. She had not been inside the office since the day that he had set her free to follow her own desires.

"What is it?" he said, as she stood hesitating.

She came slowly forward and stood beside him. "Michael!" she said, her voice very low. "Can't I work for you again?"

She did not look at him as she asked the question; somehow she could not. But she knew that he was watching her very closely.

"Why should you?" he said.

Her eyes went to the typewriter. "I know I was never much good," she said. "But you're very busy, and it might make a little difference if I helped."

"D'you want to?" he said.

She nodded silently.

"I don't know why you should be so humble about it," he said.

"You did make a lot of difference once."

"Did I?" She made a slight gesture of surprise. "Well, let me try again!"

"I'm not sure that it would be good for you," he said.

She still avoided his look, but she was gaining confidence. At least he had not repelled her, as she had somehow thought he might.

"I am—quite sure," she said.

"Better for you—possibly—than sitting moping in The Old Cottage," conceded Michael. "But what about your picture?"

"I can do that in my off time," she said. "I'm not getting on very fast with it—just now."

"Why not?" he said. "Thinking too much?"

She bent her head. "Yes. Perhaps."

He was silent for a few seconds; then: "Dona," he said somewhat abruptly, "will you tell me something?"

She clasped her hands instinctively as though to resist some sudden strain.

"No," he said. "I don't want to plague you. The fact is, you don't yet realise what I am trying to do. You will some day. Now listen! It's quite clear to me that—if we mean to silence all the chattering apes of the village—we shall have to make a few changes. I suppose your refined friend Kitty wants to know whether we've turned the mother out of the old four-poster and are sleeping in it ourselves, eh?"

Again he paused, but only for a moment. Dona had not winced; she was standing stiffly motionless.

He swept on with a curt downrightness which was somehow reassuring by its sheer weight. "Well, we don't propose to go quite so far as that to oblige them. But it seems to me we shall have to do something. My mother's room has another—that little boxroom—leading out of it. I shall sleep in there—we'll make another door on to the stairs—and you must have her room."

"Oh, Michael!" She turned with startled protest. "It's only a cupboard place! It's open to the rafters! You couldn't—and I—and I—" she stumbled nervously—"I couldn't either!"

"Don't be silly!" said Michael. He looked round. "Pull up that chair and sit down! You're shivering. I'll light the stove."

He got up and drew forward an oil stove from a corner.

"It'll probably stink," he observed. "It hasn't been lighted this winter. But it'll warm us anyhow."

Dona sat down as directed. It was true that she was shivering, and she could not conceal it. She reached out her hands to the lighted stove which soon proceeded to fulfil both Michael's predictions, charging the chill atmosphere with heavy malodorous fumes.

Michael refilled his pipe. "That's better," he remarked, as he did it. "Now—to get down to brass tacks! You may have noticed I'm a plain sort of man. You'll have to make allowances for that."

Her beautiful eyes lifted themselves for a moment. "Don't put it—like that!" she said.

Michael smiled faintly. "Well, it's the truth, however you put it," he said. "I've been thinking this thing out, and I've come to the conclusion that to mug people in successfully we must take a little trouble."

Her eyes were downcast again; the hands she stretched to the stove were trembling.

Michael began to add the fumes of his pipe to those of the stove, and a bluish haze rose and hung between them.

Dona spoke, almost under her breath. "It's impossible."

"Nothing's impossible," said Michael. "I'm sure my mother will agree. And I think you will too when you've thought it over."

She made a helpless, rather desperate gesture.

"Yes, I know," he said, and he spoke with a touch of grimness. "But we've got to get away with it somehow. This thing's got to be tackled if we're to come out on top—as I mean we shall. After all, it's a very trifling matter. We needn't strain at the gnat when we've already more or less digested the camel."

He paused, but Dona sat silent; her head bent, her hands still spread to the heat of the stove.

"Well?" he said rather suddenly. "D'you agree? Or can you suggest—anything better?"

She looked up at him again—a swift look that had in it something of entreaty. She tried to speak, but for a moment it seemed as if her voice had failed her. Then, finally, with a gasping effort:

"Yes—of course I agree," she said. "If you say—there's no other way—well, there isn't."

"Thank you," said Michael briefly. He smoked on for a few seconds in silence, then turned abruptly round to the writing-table. "Well—that's that!" he said. "Look here! Can you persuade that typewriter to do a little work for a change? I've got about three months' arrears here waiting to be dealt with. Things have gone to the dogs since you chucked it."

She rose with an alacrity that testified to a vast relief. Her hands fluttered over the typewriter. She drew it to her almost with a caressing touch.

"Oh, how good you are!" she said.

But Michael was already deeply immersed in sorting a pile of letters, and did not hear.

CHAPTER III

CHRISTMAS EVE

A COLD spell of weather set in with disconcerting suddenness in the second week in December, and Kitty Frobisher fell an indignant victim to a severe chill. It was the more exasperating in that it synchronised with the publication in the local paper of her engagement to James Wallis. Mr. Frobisher had demurred a little over this piece of ostentation, but Kitty had insisted because—as she somewhat ominously explained—one never knew.

But it was certainly hard, when one had counted upon presenting an attractive picture of maidenly modesty and dainty triumph to the public eye, to be confined to the back parlour with all the unpleasant accessories of a common cold. It made one feel common, as Kitty pathetically remarked in strict confidence to herself.

Jim too, when he came to see her, was not over-flattering in his remarks. He was not very enthusiastic about the announcement, but supposed that when a man had decided to make a fool of himself it was no good to jib at trifles. He had begun to make enquiries as to the sale of his motor-cycle and the purchase on the hire-system, of a side-car.

Also at Kitty's instigation, he had bought her a ring in the neighbouring town of Flexford, and this was by no means a "rubbishy affair", as Kitty was swift to assure all enquiring friends. It consisted of "a real tur-quoyse, my dear" surrounded by minute chips of real diamonds, and it made her plump hand look quite important. She displayed it a good deal when at length her cold allowed her to help in the shop again. It was nearing Christmas by that time, and business was brisk for Cragstone.

Old Lady Fontleigh always made a point of spending Christmas at Cragstone Park, and was in the habit of assembling a house-party for the occasion. She usually succeeded in persuading her guests to patronise Mr. Frobisher's shop, and it was mainly on that account that he and Kitty put forth such stupendous efforts to make its windows attractive.

So, with the approach of the busy season, there was not much

time to think of Dona, although Mr. Frobisher did remark once that he could have squeezed a corner for a small sketch had she cared to bring him one.

"Oh, it's no good thinking of that, Dad," was Kitty's rejoinder. "She's on to big stuff. That picture I saw was the kind that might get into the Academy if it's ever properly finished, which I somehow doubt now she's married."

"Dear me, that sounds very ambitious," said Mr. Frobisher.

"She always was a bit unexpected, if you know what I mean," said Kitty. "I must go and look her up again as soon as I've got time."

But time remained scarce up to Christmas Eve itself, when it was always a case of "all hands on deck" as Kitty expressed it, hoping that the simile was not too obscure for her listener's comprehension.

Then, just before closing time, which had been extended to eight o'clock, Mrs. Conyers came in to make a small purchase, accompanied by Mrs. Dipper who was still caretaking at Everest and had overtaken her on the road.

Mrs. Conyers looked her usual calm self, but there was something rather portentous about Mrs. Dipper who fell behind to look at Christmas cards, announcing with a sniff that there was no hurry for her as her time was her own.

Kitty made a conventional enquiry after Dona which elicited from Mrs. Conyers the quiet response that Dona had had a bit of a chill lately and had not been quite the thing.

"I've been nearly prostrate with a cold myself," said Kitty. "They do get one down and out and no mistake. Well, I'll be running round to see her as soon as Christmas is over. Tell her so with my love and best wishes! Oh, and if she wants to put one of her little pictures into the window when all this season stuff comes out, you can tell her Dad's still on."

Mrs. Conyers expressed her thanks, reciprocated Kitty's good wishes, and departed.

Then Mrs. Dipper turned round from the dim corner in which she had been rummaging.

"If you ask me," she remarked mysteriously, "I'd be inclined to say that there's more there than what meets the eye."

Kitty gave her a sharp glance. She was not very fond of Mrs. Dipper whose gift for knowing everybody's affairs both inside and

out was almost uncanny; but there was no denying that when she chose to be communicative she was always interesting. Also, she was not a person whom it seemed advisable to offend.

Kitty smiled therefore in a non-committal fashion and said: "Really?" in a voice that neither invited nor repelled.

"Yes. We don't know everything," said Mrs. Dipper. "Don't suppose you see very much of Dona nowadays, do you? No more don't I."

"She never was one to go about much," said Kitty, still sitting on the fence. "And now she's married, of course——"

"Yes, now she's married!" repeated Mrs. Dipper darkly. "And a funny thing that was—to my way of thinking. What did she want to go and marry Michael for? Garth was after her in the summer as plain as a pikestaff."

"Oh, well!" said Kitty, and laughed a little self-consciously. "That's a long while ago, isn't it? We've all of us had time to change our minds since then, and Garth didn't take long to change his."

Mrs. Dipper grunted disapprovingly. She wanted something more substantial than amiable comments from Kitty. "I expect you know all about it," she said. "Girls always hang together. But when anyone goes and gets married on the quiet without any pretence at courting, it's generally a sign that there's some reason for it."

"Reason?" said Kitty.

Mrs. Dipper gave her a stony look. "Yes, reason," she reiterated. "There's no getting nothing out of Mrs. Conyers. She's too deep. But there's something behind it all. You mark my words. I've been twice round to The Old Cottage to clean up; but Dona won't let me in. Says she's seeing to it herself. That may be or may not. But it's my belief she's got something to hide, and she's afraid to get talking. That's my belief."

"Good gracious!" said Kitty.

So far she had been discretion itself, but Mrs. Dipper knew how to fan the smallest kindling of curiosity into a flame when it suited her, and she realised that Dona's affairs might be more open to a little probing on Kitty's part than on hers. To probe Kitty herself later would be mere child's play.

"Well," she said, "you go and find out! But don't say as I've said anything! Just go easy like and take things for granted, and

look round while you're doing it! There's something funny up at the Mill. You may take my word for it. You may think you know everything, but——"

She broke off. The shop-door had opened to admit another late customer at sight of whom both Kitty and Mrs. Dipper gaped in astonishment.

"Good evening, Miss Frobisher!" said Michael, stamping his muddy feet on the mat. "Just in time, am I? I want a Christmas present for my wife."

"Good gracious!" said Kitty again, and turned her amazement into as casual a giggle as she could muster. "Well, you're rather late in the day, I must say. But we've got a few things left—nothing cheap, I'm afraid."

"I don't want anything cheap," said Michael. "May I see the other kind?"

He gave Mrs. Dipper a nod of recognition which was scarcely cordial as he advanced.

Kitty regarded him with the uncertainty which he always inspired in her. She found it difficult to feel superior in Michael's presence. She never knew whether his directness were inspired by simplicity or covered a deep-seated cynicism.

"Well, what sort of thing are you thinking of?" she enquired, and Mrs. Dipper drew a step nearer, ostensibly to get the benefit of the light on the card that she was contemplating.

"I don't know," said Michael. "D'you sell anything here besides pens and paper?"

Kitty tossed her head. "Of course we do—heaps of things. There are books, sacred and secular, leather goods, bags and manicure-sets, boxes, pictures, ornaments and inkstands."

Michael uttered a sound between a sigh and a groan. "No decent jewellery, I suppose?" he said.

"Decent!" echoed Kitty.

"If you know what I mean," said Michael with a disarming smile.

Kitty softened. "Wait a minute!" she said graciously. "Perhaps I can help you. Dad!" She raised her voice, sending it in the direction of the back-room. "You there, Dad?"

"Coming!" called Mr. Frobisher's answering voice, and in a moment he appeared in the doorway in his shirt-sleeves. "Just doing up a parcel of goods on appro. for Lady Fontleigh," he

announced with pardonable emphasis. "What is it, Kitty? Oh, hullo, Mr. Conyers! We don't often get the pleasure of seeing you here."

"The pleasure is mine," said Michael.

"He wants to look at some jewellery," said Kitty. "Good stuff, Dad! Now what about that little lot you bought over at Flexford last Tuesday in case Lady Fontleigh wanted some at the last minute?"

"That," said Mr. Frobisher rather portentously, "is already put up to go to her ladyship."

Kitty shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "Oh, well, undo it again!" she said. "Mr. Conyers wants something decent—not trashy, if you know what I mean. Trot it out, Dad! Lady Fontleigh'll never miss what she hasn't seen."

A sniff from Mrs. Dipper in the background caused Michael to swing round. "Please serve this lady first!" he said. "I'd no intention of cutting in."

"Oh, don't you mind me!" said Mrs. Dipper. "I shall be a long while yet."

"I shall be much longer," said Michael firmly.

Mr. Frobisher intervened. "No, no, Mr. Conyers. You'd better come along into the back room and have a look at things there. Much the best way."

Kitty nodded. "Yes, that's right. You go along with Dad! He's got some very nice pieces in there."

Michael turned at once towards the inner sanctuary, and Mrs. Dipper watched him with a somewhat malignant scrutiny.

"All right," she said to Kitty, as the door closed. "I'll take this card. He's a deep one, he is. There's something going on; you may take my word for it. But you won't get it out of either Mrs. Conyers or Michael. But there's some things as can never be hid for long. You'll see presently."

She placed a penny on the counter with an air of solemnity and wheeled to the door.

"And a merry Xmas to you!" she said portentously, pausing on the threshold.

"The same to you, I'm sure," said Kitty.

She was not sorry to see the last of Mrs. Dipper who was the type of person whom few people would wish to detain; but she was deeply interested in all her dark hints and insinuations, and

was determined if possible to find out the nature of that mysterious "something" that was going on up at the Mill.

She did not however need to be told that any investigations conducted in Michael's direction must lead inevitably to a stone wall that could be neither scaled nor undermined. She was beginning to know Michael.

But there were other channels open to her, and these channels she meant to explore. Whether she would impart the result of these explorations to Mrs. Dipper or not was another matter.

In any case it was closing time, and she was tired. She turned the key of the shop-door, lowered the light, and made her way across to the other door at the back.

The murmur of voices came to her as she reached it, and she paused in time to hear Michael speak with decision. "Thanks, Mr. Frobisher! Don't get out any more! That pearl ring is the one I want."

That pearl ring! Kitty recalled it on the instant. It had made her mouth water when her father had shown it to her. It was an antique half-hoop—quite a find, he had called it. He had not intended to ask a high price for it, but it was much more valuable than the pledge which had been bestowed upon her by Jim Wallis.

A sharp twinge of jealousy went through her. Some people had all the luck! Then she opened the door, and stood archly smiling.

"Well?" she enquired. "Have you found anything good enough for her?"

Michael regarded her with his black brows slightly drawn, as though not too pleased at the interruption.

"No," he said deliberately after a second or two. "I didn't expect to. Besides, I haven't got enough money for that."

"Dear me!" retorted Kitty brightly. "I was beginning to think money was no object."

He did not smile in answer. "There are a good many things it won't buy," he remarked sombrely, and turned to complete the transaction with Mr. Frobisher as though that ended the matter.

For some obscure reason Kitty felt that her only course was to withdraw again.

CHAPTER IV

THE MESSAGE

IT WAS cold and clear as Michael returned from the village to the Mill. He walked with a swinging tread that covered the ground quickly. The night was still, and in the distance, not unmusically, there rose the sound of children's voices singing a Christmas hymn. He did not pause to listen, but he whistled softly in unison as he walked. A new moon hung upturned in the starry sky like a mystic sign on an illumined scroll, and he stared at it fixedly with the eyes of a man who would fain solve some riddle.

Even when he reached his own gate, he fumbled with the latch as if he could not detach his attention from that magic semi-circle, and it was with a definite effort that he finally turned from it to walk up the garden-path.

The red blinds were drawn in the parlour, and a light glowed through them, shining out warm and welcoming into the wintry night. He reached the front-door and entered.

The parlour-door stood ajar, and as he paused to throw down his hat, Dona's voice came to him.

"Did you meet your mother in the village, Michael? She isn't back yet."

He pushed open the door. "Yes, I saw her for a second outside Frobisher's," he said. "She was going on to Smart's. I expect she'll be in directly."

Dona was seated before the fire. She had a work-basket by her side, and a pair of Michael's stockings on her lap.

She gave him a faint smile of welcome as he entered. "Mrs. Conyers made me have the fire in here," she said.

"Quite right," said Michael. He paused by her side. "She didn't make you mend those, I hope?" he said, looking at the stockings.

"Oh no!" said Dona, "I took them myself. They're not very bad."

His look went to the closed work-basket. "What else have you been doing?" he said.

She flushed at the question and bent her head over the stockings. "Just—little things," she said.

He looked down at her with a smile half-ironical and half-pitying. "You won't need to keep them out of sight much longer," he said.

She made a mute gesture, and as if in answer to it he turned and bent over the fire.

"I've been to see your friend Kitty to-night," he remarked after a moment.

"Oh, have you? I suppose she's very busy," said Dona.

Michael grunted. "Not too busy to enjoy a good gossip with another friend of yours—Mrs. Dipper."

"Oh, Mrs. Dipper! I like her," said Dona. "She's kind."

Michael grunted again. "Is she?"

"I've always thought her so." Dona spoke a little doubtfully.

"But of course she does gossip I know. Most people do."

"They do," agreed Michael. "Well, silence is your safeguard. Remember that!"

"Yes," said Dona.

"Especially where Kitty Frobisher is concerned," he added.

"I've no use for that designing young female."

Dona looked up quickly. "Oh, Michael, please! Don't call her that!"

He glanced round. "What! Haven't you realised it yet? My dear child, there's only one person in the world that counts with her."

"But everyone's like that," protested Dona in distress.

"Indeed!" said Michael rather grimly.

She stretched out an appealing hand. "I didn't mean that. You're not!" she said.

He turned fully round, and before she knew it her hand was in his. "Don't be too sure of that!" he said. "You're rather apt to leap to conclusions, aren't you?"

"Am I?" murmured Dona.

"It's a bit rash," he said, "but you'll live and learn. What d'you think I've been doing this evening?"

The hint of a smile showed on Dona's face. "You told me," she said, "you'd been to see Kitty."

He gave a brief laugh. "Can you imagine what for?"

She shook her head. "No, I can't—possibly."

He kept her hand in his. He was frowning a little as though embarrassed. "I'll tell you," he said abruptly. "I've been buying a present—for you."

"For me!" Dona's eyes widened. "Oh, not really!" she said in what was almost a voice of entreaty.

"Why not for you?" said Michael half-roughly. He thrust his free hand into his pocket and drew out a small box. "There you are! See if it fits!"

His voice seemed to hold a challenge.

Dona sat dumbly gazing for a second or two; then she rose, scattering stockings and mending materials on the floor. "Oh, you mustn't!" she said tremulously. "You mustn't!"

"That's just it!" Michael said with an odd smile. "I must."

He freed her hand, but his other remained extended with the little box upon it.

Dona drew back in open agitation. "Oh, Michael, please—don't make me!" she begged. "I couldn't take anything from you—that is, not—not anything more."

"You haven't even begun," said Michael in a voice that expressed nothing whatever. "You'll have to take it. We've got to keep up appearances."

She winced like a hurt child. "Oh, must I? It—seems so wrong."

Michael was silent, but there was insistence in his attitude; and at length very unwillingly she yielded.

She took the little box with unsteady fingers and opened it. "Oh!" she said in a wrung voice. "Not pearls—for me!"

"Why not for you?" he said again, and as if in spite of him there sounded a half-strangled note of resentment in his voice. "I suppose I may give what I choose—to my wife."

She shivered. "If I were only—worthy!" she said.

He made an almost fierce movement, but checked it instantly. "I know what you are," he said, and he uttered the words half under his breath. "I shouldn't have given you pearls if I didn't. Won't you try it on?"

She turned to him with a hint of appeal. "You do it!" she said.

He took it from her with an inscrutable countenance, and removed the ring from its nest of cotton-wool. "I should think the right hand would be best," he said.

She gave him her right hand in silence and he slipped the ring on to the third finger.

"You'll have to grow to it," he said. "It's rather loose."

She smiled at him. "Michael, I do like it," she said. "Only it's far too beautiful, and you are much too kind."

"All right. Leave it at that!" he said.

She was gazing at the ring with her head bent "If only——" she said, and stopped with an odd little catch of the breath as if she could say no more.

Michael waited. "Only what?" he said, as she remained silent.

She spoke with an effort, still bending over the ring. "It's—such a heavenly gift. I wish—Michael, I wish I could do something for you in return—more, I mean," her voice quivered on a tearful laugh, "than office work and mending stockings."

Michael stood looking at her. "You call that—a heavenly gift?" he said.

She nodded. "It is—heavenly. If I could only—give you something in return!"

"Would you," he said, "if you could?"

She lifted her eyes for a moment. "If I could!" she said.

He turned abruptly from her and stooped again over the fire. "P'raps—some day—" he said, speaking slowly, as though choosing his words—"you may have the chance."

Silence followed the sentence—a curiously intent silence, as though both of them were waiting for something more. Then, with one of her odd little foreign gestures, as though she scattered a spell, Dona stooped to collect the things which had fallen on the floor.

"I want to get these done," she said, "before Mrs. Conyers comes back."

He turned and watched her, the downward bend between his brows very apparent. A change had come over Dona during the few weeks that had elapsed since her marriage. Her beautiful face was yet too young for any lines of sorrow to be permanent; but there was about her a subdued and strangely awed look, such as may sometimes be seen on the face of one who has come back from the gates of death. In her eyes was a dawning realisation which might have been the development of her womanhood, but which had behind it a deep shadow as of some impending evil but half-understood and earnestly dreaded. When at work with Michael

she seldom broke her silence, and intimate talk even of the description of that which had just passed between them was very unusual. It was as if she sheltered herself behind that silence, and Michael, silent himself, had been content to leave it so. In their daily life together they scarcely ever touched upon the future or the past, and yet they were never absent from the consciousness of either.

But to-night some inner motive seemed to be urging Michael, and as he stood and watched her a certain hardening of resolution came into his eyes. When she turned to the table to lay down her work he spoke again, rather abruptly.

"Dona, I want you to wear that ring always—whether you want to or not."

She turned towards him with a half-startled movement. "Isn't it too good—for every day?" she questioned.

"No." He spoke with curt decision. "I'm out to defeat all these busybodies. D'you understand? And you've got to do your bit too. The only way to deceive anyone successfully is to try and deceive yourself. Understand?"

Dona looked a trifle dubious. "I'm not sure," she said.

He moved a step forward preparatory to departure, and stood for a second close to her. "If you want people to believe an untruth," he said, "you've got to pretend to yourself it's true, and to go on pretending until you almost make yourself believe it's true. You and I are husband and wife now; in another few months we shall be—father and mother. Everyone's got to believe it. Now do you understand?"

Dona had her darning-needle in her hand; she was threading it in and out of the tablecloth with a hand that was none too steady. At his last words she jabbed it suddenly inwards and it broke. She uttered a faint exclamation and held up her hand with a portion of the needle sticking in it.

Michael seized it and pulled it swiftly out. A red drop instantly welled up. "That went pretty deep," he said.

She withdrew her hand sharply. "No, not really. It's quite all right. Thank you so much. Please don't bother any more!"

Her gesture was almost one of dismissal. He turned away. "Well, don't do it again!" he said, and went to the door.

She did not respond but stood with bent head until he had passed out. Then with a queer little sound that might have been

a sob suppressed, she put her hand to her lips. But it was the ring, and not the needle-prick, which they pressed.

Out in the hall Michael paused for a moment, hearing the catch of the garden-gate. His mother's footsteps succeeded it immediately and he opened the door to admit her.

"Done your shopping?" he said.

She came up the path with the light shining upon her, and entered. "Oh, Mike!" she said. "Is that you? What about the kitchen-fire?"

"I was just going to see to it," he said. "How did you get on?"

Mrs. Conyers turned in the direction of the kitchen without replying. She moved slowly, as though weary.

Michael followed her.

The lamp over the table was burning low; he stepped forward and turned it up.

"The fire's all right," he said. "Dona's seen to that. Sit down and get warm!"

Mrs. Conyers dropped into a chair, suffering her shopping-bag to slide to the floor. "Oh, Mike!" she said.

He stood, looking down at her. "What now?" he said.

Her face was pale; she looked exhausted. But she answered him with her usual quiet courage. "My dear, I've had some news—sad news—this evening. I went into the post-office just now, on my way back, and—they gave me a cablegram that had just come in."

"A what?" said Michael. His face suddenly darkened. He straightened himself as though he confronted an enemy. "Where is it? What is it?" he said.

She made a gesture towards her bag. "It's there. But I can tell you. Michael, it's from Garth. She—poor soul—she's gone."

"Gone!" echoed Michael. "What d'you mean?"

Mrs. Conyers made a definite effort and spoke collectedly. "His wife, Michael. She has just died of fever—blackwater fever, he says, at some place on the coast of South America."

Some sort of exclamation escaped Michael, but he checked it almost in the same moment, standing there with clenched hands and eyes that glared straight before him as though they challenged the whole world.

His voice came at length with a slow, menacing quality. "So she—is dead!" he said. "And he—is free!"

"Oh yes, Mike, yes." Tremulously his mother uttered confirmation of his words. "But it's no good letting yourself think of that—or Dona either. It's—too late."

"Too late!" He flung forth the phrase with a harsh laugh. "Yes, you're right. It's too late. She's no longer his—to take or leave. He's got what he wanted, and if he isn't satisfied—let him come to me—and he shall have—something more!"

He swung round on his heel with the words and stood facing the door, though no sound had told him that Dona was in the act of pushing it open.

She stood before him, her face uplifted, white and quivering. "I didn't mean to listen," she said, "but—I felt funny and giddy outside—and I had to stop—so I heard."

"My dear!" Mrs. Conyers was out of her chair in an instant and hurrying to her.

But Michael was nearer. He swept an arm round her and drew her forward, his fury vanished like a quenched fire.

"It's all right," he said. "You've a perfect right to know. But there's nothing to be upset about. This woman was no friend of yours."

Dona submitted to the compelling arm and moved to the chair before the fire to which it drew her. She sat down with a tired movement, as though she had no choice.

After a moment she spoke without agitation, but very sadly. "No," she said, "she was no friend of mine, I know. But—I'm dreadfully sorry."

"Why, darling?" said Mrs. Conyers, a tender hand upon her head.

Dona answered in a hushed voice, as though she felt the presence of the dead in the quiet room. "Oh, because she loved Garth—so very, very much. And now—she hasn't got him any more."

CHAPTER V

THE SENTENCE

THE TIDINGS of the untimely death of the new owner of Everest spread like wildfire through the village, eclipsing for the time being all other interests, and throughout the Christmas holidays it was the main topic of conversation.

Mrs. Dipper and old Spademoore were the two centres round which the general gossip ebbed and flowed, but neither could supply any definite information. They both maintained a stoic attitude of responsibility pending instructions to which no one could take exception, and they had nothing to offer in the way of conjecture regarding the future. Quite obviously each had every intention of clinging limpet-like to the place up to the last possible moment, and certainly no one could blame them for that. It had been their sole means of livelihood for so many years.

Kitty Frobisher found time on Boxing Day, when Jim Wallis was playing football, to pay a flying visit to the Mill. She found Mrs. Conyers and Dona mending household linen in the parlour, but they could do no more than corroborate the news she had already heard. Florence Repton had died of blackwater fever, and Garth was a widower.

In response to "What ever will he do?" in shocked tones from Kitty, Mrs. Conyers could only reply that she knew nothing of his plans, and Dona volunteered nothing at all. She merely whirled the sewing-machine with silent diligence.

Kitty, taking covert stock of her, observed the pale weariness which was like a veil that could not obscure her beauty, but she wholly failed to satisfy her curiosity in any other respect. It was impossible to tell whether the tragic news had had any deep effect upon Dona, so still was she, so intent upon her task. At Kitty's suggestion that she might walk part of the way back with her, she shook her head.

"I can't, Kitty. It's too cold."

"She has had a chill," Mrs. Conyers explained, and Kitty, baffled, was obliged to take her leave alone.

She nearly ran into Michael at the gate, and was greeted by him with a sardonic hospitality which she found strangely disconcerting. He pressed her to come back with him to tea, as there was so much to talk about, and when finally she extricated herself it was with an angry sense as of having been worsted in all directions. It was odd how Michael always seemed to be at hand in these days. He had been hard enough to find before his marriage. She was beginning to entertain an active dislike for him, bred of a strong suspicion that these encounters were not as haphazard as they seemed. Hurrying homewards, she vowed to herself that she would find out all there was to know in spite of him.

It would have interested her deeply could she have watched Michael lounging into the parlour where his mother and young wife sat working, with the same sombre smile upon his face and in his eyes a grimness of determination which fully justified her sense of hostility.

Dona glanced up at his entrance, half-questioning, half-deprecating.

"Yes," he said in answer. "She's gone. I couldn't persuade her to stay."

Dona looked down again. It was his mother who said: "It's strange how much time some folks have to spare for other folks' affairs."

"Yes, it is," Michael assented briefly.

He stood for a space by the low window, gazing forth, while only the whirring of the sewing-machine under Dona's deft hands broke the silence. Then at another quiet sound, he turned.

Mrs. Conyers had laid down her work and moved to the door. She paused a moment, looking back. "I'm only going to see to the kettle," she said, and was gone.

The door closed behind her, without latching. Dona's fingers seemed to falter for a moment on the handle of the machine, then they sped on.

Michael stood and watched for a few seconds; then in a low, steady voice, without moving, he spoke. "Dona!"

At the sound of her name, her hand jerked, fluttered, stopped. The wheel spun round once or twice and stopped also. And suddenly the room was very still.

Michael spoke again across the intervening space. "Dona! You're not worrying about things, are you?"

She turned her head and looked at him with eyes that shone very strangely in her white face. "Worrying?" she said.

He explained with a certain tensivity of resolution that made his voice, quiet as it was, sound stern. "About this—Garth situation. Because—I'm saying it now so as to avoid saying it later—you've nothing whatever to worry about. He will never come here again."

Dona's hands went swiftly to her breast, as though she were trying to hold something in check there—something that seemed to struggle for freedom. She sat gazing at him in a sort of stricken silence.

He continued, sinking his voice still lower as though he too sought to control some deep impulse that fought for the mastery. "My mother sees this thing as I do, though—being his mother as well"—he spoke between his teeth—"she won't cut adrift from him altogether. If she feels she must see him—later on, she will go up to London and see him there. Anyhow, it won't be here—ever again."

"Oh!" whispered Dona. Her eyes looked almost black, gleaming with an unearthly lustre out of the deathly pallor of her face. "Is that—because—because of me?" Her lips worked piteously over the words which were barely audible.

Something impelled Michael forward; he came to her side and stooped over her. "Of course it's because of you," he said, and his voice quivered a little as though some strong emotion still strove for expression. "D'you think I'll ever let him come near you again?"

"Oh!" Dona said again, and this time it was like a sigh of exhaustion; she sank huddled in her chair. "Then it's—for always! I mean—" she spoke with difficulty, "—the misery—and the hating—. Nothing can ever be forgiven—or—or forgotten now!"

"How could it be?" he said, and for an instant a savagery he could not conquer made itself apparent in his look and voice.

She shrank from him as a trapped creature shrinking to the furthest limit of its bonds. "Ah, don't—don't—don't!" she said, and each word was as a cry wrung from her by sheer anguish. She covered her face with her hands. "And God will never forgive—either!" she wailed. "His curse is on us all!"

"Child!" Michael said, but speech went no further, for she had fallen forward across the table, and as he bent to lift her she shrank no longer or resisted, only lay unconscious in his hold, like some wild white flower that had been broken in a storm.

CHAPTER VI

PLANS

FROM that day forward Michael made no further attempt to cross the threshold of Dona's reserve. It was possible that he had done some violence to his own in his effort to define the situation; but having spoken once, he resumed his silence, leaving her more and more to his mother's care as the early weeks of a new year sped by.

By tacit consent Dona came no more to work in the office with him. The state of her health was sufficient reason for her absence, and the severity of the weather did not tend to improve this. She felt the cold intensely, and Mrs. Conyers found it difficult to protect her from it, untiringly as she sought to do so. A heavy fall of snow at the end of January was in a way a timely happening, for it made it impossible for Dona to go out, and when the February sun brought a thaw, Mrs. Dipper was in the proud position to be able to announce to all and sundry, in a triumphant whisper that carried far, the real reason for her retirement.

Gossip once more was rife for a space, but it did not reach the Mill where Mrs. Conyers pursued her daily ministrations with unshaken calm, and Dona occupied herself with the making of the tiny garments which no longer needed to be hidden away, even from Kitty's inquisitive gaze.

Kitty, as a matter of fact, had begun to tire a little of Dona's affairs and to absorb herself more fully in her own. All her energies were concentrated upon achieving her own marriage by Whitsuntide which fell early in June. Jim Wallis's old father had undertaken to remove himself and his belongings to a cottage occupied by a married daughter and her husband at the other end of the village by then, keeping only a minor share in the business; but as he flatly refused to take any sort of action before that time and Kitty was too cautious to enter the place as a bride until he had quitted it, this was the earliest date that she could hope for. It was rather annoying, but there was no help for it. Keeping Jim in a state of pleasurable anticipation was not always easy, but

even so, it was preferable to the possibility of having to look after his father for the rest of his days. Her own father was quite agreeable to her plans. He had never been hard to manage. In fact a casual observer might have wondered if he would not have been equally complacent had she been going much further away from him than the shop next door.

His books and his billiards were all that really mattered to Mr. Frobisher, and when Kitty one day suddenly wondered whether Mrs. Dipper might be induced to come and housekeep for him when Everest was sold again, he mildly agreed that he might do worse. There was certainly one thing to be said in her favour, she was not likely to want to marry again. Mrs. Dipper made no secret of the fact that her feelings in respect of matrimony had been of a distinctly anti nature for a considerable number of years before she had entered the, in her opinion, far preferable estate of widowhood. Why, she could have married old Simon Garrett times without number had she been so minded, but—bless you!—she wasn't going to put her neck into the noose again, not she! So, as a housekeeper, from the point of view of both Kitty and her father, she seemed a sound proposition.

Kitty undertook to broach the subject to her, and one wild afternoon at the end of February she went round to Everest for the purpose.

Mrs. Dipper received her with the somewhat starched courtesy which befitted her position as sole caretaker of a house that had lost two owners through death within a year.

"Goodness knows," she said, "who the next one will be. Yes, I'm very well, all things considered, which is something to be thankful for. You've heard about young Mrs. Conyers, of course? It oughtn't to happen a day before August, but I'm sure it will. And then I suppose they'll call it pre-natal! Such goings on as there are nowadays! Did y'ear about that half-witted lad up at Binnses? They used to say as 'e was in love with young Mrs. Sam Binns—Clara Rudd that was. There was another of 'em—marriage by connivance they call it. Well, that boy was found drowned in the pig-pond, only three foot of water, and Spademoore says as they've brought it in 'Suicide while of uncertain mind'. I say as 'is mind was never anything else until 'e did it, except where Clara Rudd was concerned, and she wouldn't look at 'un."

"Yes, I did hear about that," said Kitty rather primly, "but

it's not a very nice subject, is it? What news of Everest? Have you heard from Dr. Repton yet?"

Mrs. Dipper sniffed. "I've heard from his lawyer, *and* the Flexford Land Agents—Freeman and Son. And a nice lot they seem to be. Sent a man over to value everything, and if you'll believe me, he poked his nose into every cupboard in the place. I couldn't 'ardly keep me own boxes private. And the way he went on about things—why, you'd have thought nothing wasn't worth anything! And the care I've always took to keep things nice. Not that anybody ever noticed! That poor Miss Armitage—well, I don't want to speak ill of the dead and gone, but I never had a word of encouragement from her."

"I think she was always rather exclusive," said Kitty, "if you know what I mean."

Mrs. Dipper sniffed again. "I suppose she was in love—that's the truth of the matter, and it was her undoing, as you may say. If she'd only stayed as she was—well-off, with everything she wanted—But there, it's no use talking, either before or after. I suppose you're getting married yourself just as soon as you can get your young man to church?"

Kitty smiled a trifle wistfully. One did not expect anything in the way of romance from Mrs. Dipper, but her extreme frankness was a little hard to face. "Well," she said extenuatingly, "we're not going to be married before Whitsun, you know."

"And quite soon enough too!" commented Mrs. Dipper. "And don't you go seeing too much of him either! Courting couples is best apart."

She spoke with the air of an oracle, and Kitty knew better than to question her decision, though she did allow herself to wonder inwardly how, under the conditions laid down, the courting could be carried on at all.

She had no desire to draw Mrs. Dipper's criticism upon herself, however, so changed the subject with well-bred ease. "That's as may be, of course! But what I'm really wondering is this. Who is going to keep house for Dad and see that he has his little comforts when I'm gone?"

Mrs. Dipper gave vent to her customary sniff, it was almost a figure of speech with her. "Well, 't isn't as if you're going very far away. I should think you could almost pop round now and again and keep an eye on 'im yourself, couldn't you?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't do everything," said Kitty mildly. "My future husband would hardly agree to that."

"You keep 'im in 'is place!" advised Mrs. Dipper. "It's the only way to treat 'em."

Kitty allowed herself to smile at this crude counsel. "All the same, I couldn't undertake to run two establishments," she said. "I may be able to help him a little with the shop now and then, but I could scarcely hope to do more than that."

"Well, I wouldn't let anyone else come meddling round if I was you," said Mrs. Dipper. "It's easier to get some folks into a place than out again."

"That's just it," said Kitty, her smile deepening. "That's why I've come to you, if you know what I mean."

"Lawkes!" said Mrs. Dipper, swooping like a hawk upon the revelation thus tactfully indicated. "So it's me you're after, is it? Want me to go and look after your pa!"

Kitty looked down at her gloves. "We thought we would just put it to you," she explained. "We thought that things being so uncertain here, you might be beginning to look round for something else before long. And naturally Dad would like to have someone he knows to take care of him when I am gone. There are so few suitable people about."

Mrs. Dipper acknowledged the compliment with another sniff. "Well, I've got to wait and see what happens, haven't I?" she said. "Young Garth is trying to sell the place, and there's no knowing who may take it."

"Oh, he really is selling, is he?" said Kitty.

Mrs. Dipper nodded portentously. "And The Old Cottage too—so I'm told. But whether he'll manage to get hold of anyone as'll buy 'em is another matter."

"Oh, well," said Kitty brightly. "There's plenty of time, isn't there? Anyhow, it's an idea that might be worth your considering if other things fall through. Naturally, I shouldn't like to leave poor Dad in the air—between the swings and the roundabouts, if you know what I mean."

"Some folks are easier to understand than others," remarked Mrs. Dipper without enthusiasm. "Well, I don't mind thinking it over, though life over a shop isn't the same as doing for anyone in a private house. And I couldn't stand being interfered with neither—not at my time of life. And that's *my*

meaning, Miss Frobisher; so maybe you'd like to think it over too."

She ended on her most expressive sniff, and Kitty, a little crushed, rose to take her departure.

"Of course I quite understand that," she said. "Perhaps I've said enough for the present, and I must be going. We could discuss terms later on. But we shouldn't dream of asking you to help in the shop. Don't imagine that, will you? Only to see to poor Dad's little comforts and so on. I'm sure you know what I mean."

"Oh yes, I've got you all right," said Mrs. Dipper. "But we shall just have to see what happens. It's a long way off to next June. Maybe your own plans'll get a hitch up before then. There's no knowing. Young men are very slippery nowadays. The only safe way is to get it done like Dona at a moment's notice. You be very careful, Miss Frobisher! And don't you take no risks! There's some things that's easier done than undone."

With which enigmatic utterance she saw her visitor to the door and bolted herself into the empty house with the caution born of sixty-eight years' grim experience. Whatever "them flighty gals" might elect to do, it was quite certain that Sarah Dipper would take no further risks of any description as long as she lived.

CHAPTER VII

THE LORD'S PRAYER

WINTER relaxed its grip at last, and a green world slowly emerged. The willows along the water's edge turned a rosy crimson that seemed to intensify day by day and made a vivid contrast against the blue of the spring sky. From the meadows came the bleating of young lambs. Sometimes Dona would walk across the road and lean on the coping of the bridge above the rushing mill-stream to watch them. She was better in health than she had been throughout the winter, but her eyes were deeply shadowed and wistful. When she saw the first swallow swoop over the dancing water she marked its flight through a sudden film of tears. It brought the memory of Carlo to her mind, and somehow she was conscious of an intense longing for him. His careless philosophy, notwithstanding its cynicism, would have helped her.

She saw but little of Michael in those days. Mrs. Conyers was her constant companion. And of Garth she heard no word. She believed that he was in England, but a very strong reluctance to mentioning his name restrained her from asking any questions. She spent most of her time in the little parlour, and she never saw the familiar handwriting on an envelope beside Mrs. Conyers' work-basket for which she had once looked so eagerly.

All that was over for her now. During those long dark winter months something in her had changed, something had died. She was aware of the difference within herself, but introspection had never been a habit with her. Very seldom had she attempted to probe into her own inmost reserve. And, strangely, as the weeks slipped by, it was upon Carlo that her thoughts most constantly dwelt. It was almost as though she heard his voice calling to her across illimitable spaces. She was quite sure that he had never forgotten his Donita Celestis.

May came with a flash of summer and a suggestion of thunderous heat. An intense languor descended upon Dona—a

weariness so great that at times it seemed as if life itself were a burden too heavy to be borne.

Tenderly as Mrs. Conyers watched her, there was little that she could do to mitigate that weariness. It hung upon her like chains from which there was no escape. She could only comfort herself and Dona with the reflection that things would be very different presently, when the little one that was coming lay safely in her arms.

The premature heat broke quite suddenly in a storm of unexpected violence late one night after the household had gone to bed. Dona was not sleeping; her sleep was generally broken and uncertain, and the long roll of thunder up the valley did not startle her.

She had the old four-poster bed drawn up as close to the open window as possible, and from it, propped on pillows, she watched the distant lightning which Carlo had taught her to know as a thing of beauty. It was playing along the hills behind the Monolith Woods, and as it drew nearer and the thunder swelled she saw the whole countryside lighted as it were by the fitful gleaming of a gigantic torch. The wonder of it filled her spirit with awe. Looking across the low raftered room which Mrs. Conyers had given up for her use she saw the shadows leaping in that eerie illumination and wondered if Michael were awake in the room beyond. The door that led thither was never used by either. He had made another entrance on to the stairs by which he came and went, and as he always ascended at night without his shoes she seldom heard anything of him. The room he had converted into a sleeping-chamber was a box-like apartment of the roughest description with only a sky-light for window. He slept on a camp-bed, and there was space for little besides on account of the steeply-slanting roof. Dona was sure that the heat must be intense in there just as the cold must have been a few weeks before, but she knew that his stubborn endurance would never admit the existence of any form of discomfort. He had made his own decision as to what was necessary, and nothing would turn him from it. But she felt troubled about him none the less. It hurt her to think of him making sacrifices for her sake.

She thought of him as she lay there watching the swiftly approaching storm with an ache at the heart which was never wholly

absent. He gave so much in his dumb, determined fashion, and in return he received so little. Life was like that, it seemed. All its best gifts were withheld from those who gave. And again she thought of Carlo and his whimsical cynicisms. It was as if his voice had spoken in her soul.

A vivid flash over the river-valley recalled her, and the sharp detonation that followed told of the nearness of the coming tempest. Till that moment all had been still, but now along the valley there suddenly arose a wind.

Like a storm-fiend it raced across the meadows, and in the flickering lightning she saw the pollard-willows writhing like some gnome-like monsters in torture. The sound of it seemed to fill the whole world, and behind it like a charging phantom army came the rush and the clamour of rain. It was as though the heavens were split asunder. She had no time to pull the window shut before the downpour was upon her, and with it such a flaming fury of storm that she shrank back, blinded, bewildered, almost stunned, on her pillows. It was as though all the forces of the universe were let loose and hurling madly through lurid spaces, shattering the darkness and silence of the night to atoms.

The rain roared through the casement with terrifying violence, battering her, soaking her face, her hair, her shoulders almost as though she had been caught in the icy wash of the mill-stream. She tried to rise against it, but it seemed to hurl her back, making her feel that the demon that had lashed the willows so mercilessly a moment before had now leapt upon her with redoubled force. Gasping and powerless, she gave way before the onslaught, and in that instant, though she scarcely knew it, a cry escaped her—an inarticulate, piteous cry for help.

She certainly did not expect help, so completely overwhelmed was she; and when an answering cry rang through the room, she stared in sheer amazement. By the quivering flare of the lightning she saw a figure leap towards her—a figure that flung itself across the foot of the bed and wrestled fiercely with the window-fastening. Still half-stunned, she heard the window slam and then the wild pattering of hail upon the panes, telling of the expulsion of the storm-fiend. There followed a dazzling flash and a frightful crash of thunder that shook the house, and then came a strange lull as though the baffled fury had for the moment spent itself. The lightning still played weirdly about the room, and she heard

the wild wind still raging in the distance, but the awful tempest of sound had lessened.

Through the crackle of the hail-stones against the window, she heard Michael speak above her head.

"Are you all right, child?"

The deep voice sent a strange sensation through her; it was as though her heart suddenly swelled too much for speech. She stretched out a trembling hand.

His warm and comforting clasp steadied her. She came back to the full possession of her senses to find him standing by her side, while she herself had drawn close to him as one instinctively seeking shelter.

His free hand touched her hair, her face. "You're wet through," he said.

She was aware of a strong desire to weep which it took her utmost resolution to resist. "I'm all right—all right," she told him rather brokenly.

"You're not all right," he said. "I ought to have come in sooner. Shall I call my mother?"

"No—no!" Dona was still struggling for self-command. "I'm not really afraid. It was only—for the moment."

"You're very wet," he said.

She essayed a weak laugh. "Only my face. It doesn't matter."

"I'll get you a towel," he said.

But her hand still clung to his. "No—please! I shan't catch cold. It was my own fault. I ought to have shut the window before it came."

Another vivid flash lit the room, and as the thunder crashed again she hid her face against him.

His hand pressed her head again with kindly reassurance. "It's all right. It'll soon be over," he said.

The reverberations of the thunder died away, and again the downpour of the rain filled the night with a torrent of sound. That also slowly decreased in volume, and they heard the rush of water along the gutterings and pipes of the old house with here and there the fierce pattering of an overflow.

The lightning shone again, flickered around the room and was gone. "Shall I light a candle?" said Michael.

Dona stirred half-reluctantly and raised her head. She was shivering a little. "It is dark, isn't it?" she said.

"Any matches anywhere?" said Michael.

"I think so. Yes—on the dressing-table." Nervously she answered him. "But please don't bother about them! I'm all right now." She added shyly: "Thank you so much for coming in!"

And again her hands clung to him as though they would fain keep him by her side.

He remained there without further words while the thunder rolled in the distance and the rain streamed down with steadily lessening force. The storm was passing away down the valley, and behind it through riven clouds there shone a faint steadfast light that spoke of a rising moon.

Turning her head at length Dona saw it, and uttered a brief sigh. "It isn't so dark now," she said.

"No, it's getting better," said Michael, but he still stood beside her, holding her, as though in answer to a mute request.

After a moment hesitatingly she spoke again. "Did the thunder wake you? Were you asleep?"

He answered bluntly. "No, I knew it was coming. I was waiting for it."

"You thought I'd be frightened?" she said.

"Thought you might be startled," said Michael.

Her hand pressed his arm. "I'm not—generally," she said. "It's only—just now."

He stood rather rigidly. "I know," he said. "I understand."

"It'll be different—presently," she said rather wearily, as though repeating the somewhat bleak solace with which she was wont to reassure herself.

"Of course it'll be different," said Michael practically. "Nothing ever stays the same."

"I didn't mean—quite that," she said.

"What did you mean?" said Michael.

With a catch in her breath and her voice very low she told him. "I mean—life can't go on being—quite so difficult. It's just—the waiting that's hard, that's all."

"Are you afraid?" said Michael.

She leaned her head against him as though she lacked the strength to hold it up any longer. "I'm trying not to be," she said. "But I'm dreadfully tired." After a moment she added:

"I expect most women feel like that, don't you?"

"You poor child!" he said.

She made a light gesture of negation. "I'm not a child any more. And I'm paying for my own wickedness. But—but—" she began to weep softly against his arm—"it's hard on the poor little baby— isn't it?—that's never done anything wrong."

"Don't you fret about that!" Michael said, and laid his hand again very steadily upon her head. "We're going to take care of it together."

She continued to weep piteously, but without violence. "You're so much—too kind. And I've never even told you how sorry I am—for having been so bad."

"There's no need for you to do that," Michael said with a certain grimness. "You don't give me credit for much understanding, do you?"

"You're—much too good—to understand," sighed Dona.

"Don't let's talk nonsense!" said Michael.

She made an effort to check her tears. "I won't. I'm sorry. I've no right to bother you with things like that. If—if only I could pray—I should feel better."

"Why can't you?" Michael said.

She swallowed a sob. "I don't know. I think I feel too bad."

"I thought it was only the good people that didn't need that sort of thing," he said.

She looked up at him in the darkness. "Michael, do you pray?"

There was a pause, and she added swiftly: "Oh, don't tell me! I shouldn't have asked."

Michael spoke deliberately. "You can ask anything you like—always. I don't know that I can pray as women understand the term. I try—sometimes."

"Can you say the Lord's Prayer," she whispered, "for me?"

Again there was a very definite pause before Michael said: "I'll try—if you like."

"Let's try—together!" said Dona.

She hardly expected it, but without demur he knelt down by her pillow.

The moonlight was growing stronger behind the dispersing clouds. The storm had passed away, and the rain had almost ceased. Over the dim meadows a great calm seemed to spread like a veil. And in the silence, both sunk to an undertone, two voices began to pray, the one firm and even, the other full of a quivering hesitancy.

On through each familiar phrase of the great Prayer they went together until suddenly the man's voice stopped. "And forgive us our trespasses—as we forgive them that trespass against us." It was the girl's voice only, shy and uncertain, that finished the petition. At the end of it she paused as if waiting for him to join her, but he did not speak again.

She finished the Prayer faintly by herself, and then quietly Michael rose to his feet, drew the bedclothes gently up to her shoulders, and went back to his room.

CHAPTER VIII

PREPARATIONS

IT WAS nearly three weeks later that Mrs. Dipper marched solemnly across the village green to Mr. Frobisher's shop, and entering, with her most forbidding "take-me-or-leave-me" expression, announced with her eloquent sniff that her boxes were all tied up and waiting to be collected.

Kitty, running in from the back room, greeted her almost effusively. She had known for some time that Mrs. Dipper's mind was made up.

"And we're quite ready for you," she said. "I'm very glad you've come a few days beforehand. It'll give me time to show you where everything is kept."

"I don't suppose as there's much as I couldn't just as easy find out for meself," returned Mrs. Dipper none too graciously. "I've come to help and not to hinder."

"I know," said Kitty, beaming upon her. "And you certainly can help, for I've got so much to get through that I hardly know which way to turn."

"I shouldn't have got here so soon," said Mrs. Dipper, resolutely refusing to be regarded as a benefactress, "but I'm not wanted up at Everest no more. It's sold."

"Sold!" echoed Kitty.

Mrs. Dipper turned a sudden gulp into a more violent sniff than usual. "Yes, I said sold. Mrs. Fontleigh's got it. They've bin holding it up for her till she got back from abroad. Well, she come in to look over it a week ago, and now it's all settled. They've got the place for a summer resource, and they're a-keeping Spademore on to look after it."

At this point Mrs. Dipper turned her back upon Kitty with an abruptness which to a casual observer might have appeared discourteous.

But Kitty knew better. "Oh, that's too bad," she said sympathetically. "I suppose they want him for the garden."

"And he never does nothing—except dig," asserted Mrs.

Dipper, fiercely grappling with herself to wrench her handkerchief from some obscure hiding-place about her person, "when he isn't 'aving one up at 'The Green Dragon'. It's a place as I've never entered meself, nor ever shall so long as that there Mrs. Rudd 'olds the licence."

"Of course not," agreed Kitty. "One doesn't. I mean of course one couldn't. Well, anyway," she spoke on a brighter note, "we're very lucky to get you here, and if other people can't appreciate you—we can."

Mrs. Dipper, having at length run her handkerchief to earth, dragged it forth and blew her nose with vigour; then she turned round and surveyed the neat little shop with a long, disparaging stare. "Well," she said finally, "maybe I'm more suited to this sort of thing. Poor Mr. Garrett and your pa are more in my line than any of your Armitages and Fontleights. What they want is a kitchenful of perky young gals with frills round their heads and no skirts to speak of, and I'm sure I wish 'em joy."

"That's right," said Kitty gaily. "Everyone to their own taste! Now come along and have a cup of tea! Dad's busy outside unpacking some books. He wants to get everything straight and out of the way by Whit Monday, so as to give me a proper send-off. I'll run in next-door presently and get Jim to go round with the side-car and fetch your boxes. He's got it, you know, on the hire system—a real beauty."

Mrs. Dipper tried to grunt disapproval, but the radiant face of the bride-elect made it difficult to be quite as emphatic as she would have liked to be. She followed Kitty to the kitchen for the proposed refreshment where somewhat grudgingly she remarked that she supposed there was going to be a honeymoon.

"Why, of course!" said Kitty, dimpling. "It wouldn't feel like getting married without, would it? We are going to Plymouth for two or three nights to see a very old aunt of Jim's who isn't expected to live very long. He's very anxious for me to make a good impression, so I must try and look my best, mustn't I?"

"I shouldn't overdo it," advised Mrs. Dipper dryly. "Old folks see a bit further than you expect 'em to sometimes."

"Oh, I know," said Kitty. "Tact is everything in this world. Besides, it's not kind to let anyone think you're waiting to step into their shoes, is it?"

"If I thought as anybody was a-waiting for mine, I'd burn all

I'd got and die in the work-house," said Mrs. Dipper with fanatical fervour. "I'd even 'ave a pauper's funeral."

Kitty looked at her with momentary awe; then she smiled again. "Ah well, we mustn't let that happen, must we? Now let me show you my wedding-cake! I finished it off this morning, and I've got it here in the larder. I think it's quite tasteful, but of course I don't want anything showy."

With subdued pride she led the way, and Mrs. Dipper, bleakly surveying the white and silver masterpiece over her shoulder, observed with brief scorn. "You didn't do all that yourself, so don't tell me as you did!"

Kitty turned with flushed remonstrance. "I was just going to explain, I made all the eating part and did the icing. But the ornamental part came from Betts' at Graybridge. They are doing the catering for us," she added rather grandly, "so it seemed the simplest way."

"Oh, that top part's hired, is it?" said Mrs. Dipper. "Well, I will say I call that sensible. All the fuss and circumstance people go in for nowadays fair makes me sick. Got any bridesmaids?"

She shot the question so suddenly that Kitty banged the larder-door from sheer nervousness; but she speedily recovered herself and turned upon her questioner with some hauteur.

"Mrs. Dipper, I shouldn't dream of being married without bridesmaids. Mary Betts is to be one of them and Mabel Hanson the other."

Mrs. Dipper sniffed. "Looks as if the Bettises are running the show. I suppose they took a bit off for that. Young Mabel Hanson is Jim Wallis's sister's gal, isn't she? Pity you couldn't have had Dona; but I s'pose her time's getting near now. They all keeps very close up at the Mill, and as for Garth, well, I've never set eyes on him since he was left a widower."

"Really!" said Kitty, opening her round eyes. "Do you think they've quarrelled?"

Mrs. Dipper shook her head. "There's no knowing," she said darkly. "There ain't much talk about 'em nowadays. People forget, you know. But I've always had my suspicions, and I always shall. They're deep, that Conyers lot—deep as the mill-stream. There's no getting down to 'em. D'you ever see anything of 'em?"

"Well, I haven't lately," Kitty confessed. "I've been so busy.

I shall try to see more of Dona when I am married. I think it would be good for her."

Mrs. Dipper uttered a most unusual laugh. "Yes; you try! I've not seen her meself for six weeks or more. She never seems to go near The Old Cottage now."

"Oh! Hasn't Mrs. Fontleigh bought that too?" questioned Kitty.

"No. That's left for the present. She asked about it, but the key was at the Mill, so she didn't go no further. 'Tisn't much good now," said Mrs. Dipper, stirring her tea contemptuously. "They turned it into a barn to paint their pictures in."

"Oh, I know," said Kitty. "And what has happened to Dona's picture, I wonder? I shall really have to find out about that."

Mrs. Dipper sipped a spoonful of tea with a grimace. "Bless you, you'll never find out anything about them Conyers. Why, even Joe Bestes mother don't know nothing, and for all she's bedridden there ain't many people's business she can't tell you a bit about. But when Dona's got a baby, she won't worry no more about pictures, you may be sure."

"It'll be a pity if she doesn't," said Kitty. "I always say if one has a *flair* for a thing one ought to follow it up, if you know what I mean."

Mrs. Dipper did not, but she would not demean herself by admitting it; so she merely remarked that people who couldn't move without flares to guide them didn't deserve to get anywhere. And there the matter ended, Kitty having too much tact or too little courage to enlighten her ignorance.

She was genuinely sorry that Dona was not to be at her wedding, but she had too much to occupy her mind to dwell upon her friend's absence. Moreover, there was no denial of the fact that during the past six months they had drifted very far apart. Perhaps they had never been very close, and certainly they had developed in completely opposite directions. But Kitty was of too easy-going a nature to feel that she had been thrown over, and she had little doubt that the friendship could be renewed without any serious difficulty at any time.

She fully intended that it should be, and meanwhile she gave herself up to her own affairs with a wholehearted zest that augured well for their success. She was determined that hers was to be the wedding of the year at Cragstone. It had always been

her ambition to achieve this triumph and she spared no effort to carry it out. As she brightly remarked, a girl seldom had more than one wedding-day, and she had every intention of making the most of hers.

But for the installation of Mrs. Dipper, Mr. Frobisher would have fared ill during the hectic three days that preceded his daughter's wedding. He was occupied, as usual during holiday-time, with the sorting of books and other shop-goods, and if Mrs. Dipper had not kept a lynx-eye upon his comfort he would probably have foregone his meals altogether. For Kitty was in a complete whirlwind of excitement and preparation. No fond parent ever made more earnest provision for a daughter's nuptials than did Kitty for her own. There was so much to be attended to that poor Dad could never have arranged, and with it all there was Jim—funny old Jim—always lying in wait as it were at every turn.

For the wedding-fever seemed to have caught him too—though it took a form that was rather of boisterous pre-possession than devoted anticipation. He was really a little difficult to cope with at times, but Kitty managed—with infinite tact, my dear—to keep him more or less within bounds. With uplifted finger and coy promises she sent him about his business a dozen times a day, which, as Mrs. Dipper dourly admitted, was perhaps as much as could be expected under the circumstances.

The weather was perfect—early summer at its best. As Kitty said, even a royal bride could not have been more highly favoured in that respect; and being married on Whit Monday of course gave one the extra advantage of a decorated church. In fact, everything that could be done to ensure the success of the ceremony was being done, and Kitty herself was radiant.

Occasional thoughts of Dona shot through her mind on the last day of her spinsterhood, and they were accompanied by a vague uneasiness; but there was no time to go round to the Mill House. Last-moment preparations kept her busy. Moreover, she had been foiled so often by Michael that she was beginning to tell herself that it was really of no use to attempt to see Dona until she was safely through what Kitty discreetly termed "her trouble". Like Mrs. Dipper, she very strongly suspected that this was by no means far distant, and as she could do nothing to help, it seemed a waste of valuable time to attempt to seek her out.

Later on she would have more leisure to make a further effort. So, ignoring doubts, she pursued her ardent course, sparing an hour for the morning service to satisfy herself that the Whitsun decorations were in every respect suitable for a bridal ceremony, but refusing with smiling firmness to accompany Jim on a trial spin in the afternoon. As she told him, one did not get married every day, and if he had nothing more important to do, she had.

This final dismissal of her *fiancé* gave her time to complete all the essential arrangements for the morrow's great event, and she retired to bed at last with the satisfied feeling of a day well spent and the pleasing reflection that all that now remained to be done was to turn out as fair a bride as Cragstone had seen or could possibly hope to see in her generation.

CHAPTER IX

THE WEDDING DAY

FINE weather was practically a foregone conclusion. All through the brief June night the sun-glow travelled round the northern horizon, and though the moon had set there was no darkness. The starlight was as the shining of a myriad fairy-lamps strung across a deep sapphire sky. The river-meadows were steeped in magic; the far woods were full of it. It was a new world from which all that was commonplace had faded quite away.

The coming of the dawn in calm glory was like the slow lifting of a curtain disclosing strange eternities. The singing of a thousand birds rose to greet it, but there was no breath of wind to stir the willows; only the lingering fragrance of the spell-wrapt earth went up like incense to the brightening heaven.

It was in that sacred interval between the dawn and the day that Michael Conyers suddenly emerged from the Mill House and crossed the yard to the barn. He went swiftly, looking neither to right nor left, not even aware of the growing glory. The hand with which he pushed the key into the lock was not wholly steady. He wrenched the door open almost savagely.

A bicycle was lodged against the wall inside. He pulled it out and re-crossed the yard, still with the look of a man who scarcely sees his surroundings. Then he was at the gate into the lane. He dragged at the latch and passed out, leaving everything open behind him. Mounting the bicycle, he was gone, head down, streaking like a greyhound through the windless dawn. And behind him the swifts, suddenly awake, swooped with shrill cries from the eaves of the old house, wheeling in amazing circles over the motionless willows, returning to chuckle in their nests, just as they had chuckled years ago, when Dona had watched by Carlo's side and he had taken that "step into the open air" which had left her alone. . . .

The sun rose in a golden splendour transcending all thought, and even the birds were hushed to silence as the opalescent tints of dawn melted in the fiery glow of the new day.

The hours swept on, and the sun mounted the cloudless sky. Kitty awoke to the urge of a strong sense of importance, and got up as though a fanfare of trumpets had aroused her. There still remained certain arrangements which could not be left with safety to the discretion of Mrs. Dipper, though the new housekeeper had, in her sardonic fashion, done her best to assist the bride-elect to make what she termed "a decent show of it." The clearing up of the mess afterwards—to continue according to Mrs. Dipper's descriptive phraseology—must of necessity be left to her. But, as Kitty reflected, the triumph would then be achieved, so that did not matter so much.

The wedding was fixed for twelve o'clock—an hour which would not interfere with any Bank Holiday pastimes in the village. Bettises from Graybridge arrived before eight to pitch a marquee-tent in the yard at the back for the reception. It was of very modest dimensions, but Kitty's heart swelled as she watched its erection. Everything was turning out according to plan.

It promised to be a very hot day, and Mr. Frobisher early showed signs of strain. He pursued his daughter with a Prayer Book to beg for instructions as to the rite of giving away the bride. It was not explained as fully as could be desired, and he had been too worried at his own wedding to notice how the gift was effected.

Kitty tried to explain, but he was too nervous to understand without a practical demonstration, and they went in search of Mrs. Dipper to aid in the rehearsal. She was discovered at the side-door deep in conversation with old Spademore, who tramped away at their approach, leaving a very agitated female behind him.

"What can be the matter?" said Kitty.

Mrs. Dipper enlightened her with the volubility of intense excitement. "It's Dona. She was took ill in the night—not just the ordinary—took mortal bad—and not expected to live."

"Oh, good gracious!" exclaimed Kitty, startled.

"There!" ejaculated Mrs. Dipper. "I oughtn't to 'ave told you. It's enough to put any young gal off. But I knew there was something about. Did y'ear them owls last night—a-callin' and a-callin'? There baint no good about when the owlses start a-kickin' up like that."

"Oh, dear!" said Kitty in distress. "What shall we do?"

"You can't do anything, my dear," said her father. "You may be sure they're all doing all they can for her. But I didn't know—I didn't know—" he ruminated, "that the affair was expected so soon."

"It's pre-natal," announced Mrs. Dipper, grimly charitable at the eleventh hour. "I've known them cases before, Mr. Frobisher. Don't you make any mistake about that!"

"Oh, of course not!" he concurred hastily. "I mean—I wasn't suggesting—hadn't thought—of anything else. Come, my dear, we'd better go. It's almost time for you to think of dressing. And I must do the same. We can't do anything except hope for the best. Let us hope we may get better news later on!"

"Oh yes!" said Kitty. "I must know. I couldn't go off on my honeymoon with a quiet mind unless. Oh dear, I do believe that's Jim! Do go and send him away, Dad! I can't see him before we meet at the altar. Nobody ever does. It's most unlucky."

But Jim was already upon them, and Kitty was seized, protest notwithstanding, and dragged into the darkness of the shuttered shop for some boisterous love-making while her father and Mrs. Dipper with mutual shrugs of tolerance and the reverse went their respective ways.

The tent was erected, the carpet unrolled, the tables with their refreshments duly arranged, before Kitty at length escaped from her importunate lover and fled upstairs to dress. She had meant to allow herself plenty of time, but there was not a moment to spare. She told herself indignantly as she raced through the toilet which was to have been almost a ritual in itself that Jim really was the limit, and it would be a relief to be married, then perhaps she would get a little peace. She was feeling thoroughly ruffled, and had it been possible would have gladly dispensed with him altogether at the wedding ceremony. Unfortunately this was out of the question, though she regarded him as quite the least important factor of the whole function. She had worked so hard to gratify her vanity that she was completely tired out, and now that Jim had upset her with his crude persistence she felt almost inclined to abandon everything and refuse to have anything more to do with him. Pride alone restrained her. The whole village was waiting, and she could not afford to make a laughing-stock of herself. There was always the future to be

reckoned with, and she was too shrewd to ignore it. Besides, one glimpse of her flushed face in the glass had a wonderfully reassuring effect. She was looking quite her prettiest in spite of everything. People would probably say she was throwing herself away, and they would be right. But life had its compensations, and the mere possibility of such an opinion being expressed was one of them. As to Jim, she supposed that all men were alike in some respects and she must just make the best of him. However highhanded he might be, she had considerable faith in the force of her own personality, and he would not find it easy to maintain undisputed mastery for long.

So, with mixed sentiments, the bride adorned herself, and went forth finally to meet her fate with a vexed wonder as to why her enthusiasm had evaporated just when she needed it most.

Her spirits revived, however, during the brief drive to the church. She found that her father needed a little prompting and reassuring—a circumstance which went far towards reassuring herself. When she walked up the aisle on his arm her self-possession was such that she bowed right and left to her friends with magnificent *sang-froid*. She made a charming picture, and she knew it without the murmured comments that reached her from all sides.

Jim, too, made quite a presentable bridegroom on the whole, and she gave him a gracious smile of approval, since he had evidently taken considerable trouble to rise to the occasion. He cloaked his natural embarrassment with a devil-may-care aspect which had its distinctly attractive side, and her inherently good temper soon gained the upper hand and banished the last of her resentment.

It was a radiant Kitty who at length emerged from the church with floating veil into the hot June sunshine on the arm of her husband amid showers of *confetti* which assailed them from all sides. The peal of six bells rung at feverish speed had an invigorating effect also, and the cup of bridal triumph overflowed.

"What a game!" said Jim, mopping his forehead as he sank back beside her in the open village-taxi.

"After all, it's only once in a lifetime," she laughed back as she dodged another shower. "At least—generally—if you know what I mean."

The bells pealed on at intervals throughout the afternoon and on into the evening, long after the newly-wedded pair had departed for Plymouth in the aggressively new side-car with the new suit-case and hold-all strapped on at the back together with an old bedroom slipper, once the property of Jim Wallis senior, which the wags of the wedding-party had fastened in a conspicuous position to dangle behind.

Kitty's first intention of obtaining news from the Mill House before departing on her honeymoon was not fulfilled, but her father promised to write first thing in the morning so that she would hear before the following night. And after all, Dona was young, and Kitty, accustomed to look on the bright side, could not picture the possibility of tragedy in connection with her.

So without serious misgiving she departed, leaving the pealing bells behind her, in the gold of the sinking sun. . . .

That same sun had nearly dropped below the red-glowing horizon, and the bells were pealing for the last time in honour of Kitty Frobisher's wedding when in the raftered bedroom of the Mill House the parish-nurse turned from the old four-poster and spoke in an undertone to Mrs. Conyers, standing in the background. There was another form behind her, but neither of the women paid any heed to that.

"Quick!" said the nurse. "Show her the baby! It may—bring her back."

Mrs. Conyers stooped forward. She had a little bundle in her arms that wriggled and made queer noises from time to time.

Very tenderly she spoke to the childish figure in the wide four-poster bed. "Look, darling! See the dear little lamb—your very own! Don't you want to hold him in your arms?"

Dona's eyes looked up at her from the pillow—strange, sad eyes that were heavy with the shadow of Death. She did not attempt to speak—and the only sounds to be heard were the bells that pealed in the distance and the cries of the wheeling swifts outside the open window, flying in rapid circles, gathering food for their young beneath the eaves.

"Look, darling!" Mrs. Conyers said again. "Your own wee baby! Won't you look at him?"

She held her burden closer. She showed the tiny face of the sleeping babe. And Dona's eyes, still deeply shadowed, came to it, dwelt upon it.

She spoke at length in a husky whisper. It was almost as though the spirit, and not the body, found utterance.

"Little—Carlo!" she said. "God bless my—little Carlo! Please will you take care of him for me—you—and Michael?"

Then the heavy eyes closed, and she seemed to sleep—while the calling birds flew to their nests under the eaves and chuckled softly over their young.

END OF PART III

PART IV

CHAPTER I

LITTLE CARLO

A NEW interest had come into the life of Dash the spaniel. He was growing old and exceedingly obese, but this new thing had done for him what his age-long feud with Polly the tortoise-shell cat had failed to do. It had revived his waning powers, and Polly was no longer an object of notice unless she actually had the effrontery to intrude her disgusting sleek personality upon him. Whenever reasonably possible, he ignored her, and to give her her due she was not as a rule a pushing cat. Also, the wonderful and novel attraction which drew the old dog so irresistibly was one which held small appeal for her. The wheels of the perambulator, that was usually to be found nowadays close to the porch, were of far more value in her eyes than the odd shapeless bundle with the pink creature inside that made occasional noises within it, although it was not to be denied that the said noises might have emanated from one of her own species. Wheels were obviously invented for a cat to wind herself in and out of with loud purrings, and it was difficult to see why the gross and generally contemptible Dash should take up his station close by in order to object to this form of self-indulgence. When the perambulator chanced to be empty she could coil and rub herself around it to her heart's content. If he were present, he was content to look the other way with subdued and wheezy murmurings. But when the Pink Creature occupied it, things were very different, and Polly's physical exercises usually ended in a high leap on to the wall between yard and garden whence, arched and outraged, she could look down and spit if she chose upon protector and *protégé* alike. Why Dash should have constituted himself guardian of that extraordinary little lump of flesh was wholly beyond Polly's somewhat limited comprehension. She would have curled herself on the top of it without scruple had a suitable opportunity presented itself. For the warm fluffiness in which it nestled was of the description to lure any discriminating cat. But opportunities were never forthcoming. For even if Dash by any rare circumstance were

absent from his post, someone was always about to foil the intention almost before it took form; either Mrs. Conyers coming out for a fond look or the master himself tramping forth to throw a brief glance under the linen cover of the perambulator. Or sometimes when the sun was not too hot a slight childish figure would emerge from the shadow of the porch and stoop over the cocoon-like object, holding on to the sides of the carriage as though support were needed and gazing in rapt adoration at the unconscious pink face on the pillow. Polly regarded this particular apparition with deep suspicion because it was so like the shadow of her play-fellow of former days—Dona yet not Dona.

The old Dona had never passed her without a word or a touch, but this new, strangely unsubstantial being never had any attention to spare for her. And the quick dancing tread was lacking. The new Dona moved slowly, silently, like a tired spirit. Her face had the whiteness of a flower, and out of it her great dark eyes looked forth with an arresting earnestness that did not seem to be of earth. There was nothing childlike about her now. She was beautiful, but no longer with the beauty of youth. When she hung absorbed over her sleeping baby there was about her a certain wistful wonder that was more pathetic than tears. It was as though she had been caught in the whirlpool of Fate and cruelly battered, and then flung up to safety; but a safety so precarious that she hardly believed in it. Always in the depths of those shadowy eyes sorrow and dread seemed to lurk together. She had so nearly lost her grip on life that it was almost as if she were no longer aware of its possibilities, being still beyond their reach; and the only thing that held her from slipping away entirely was that amazing tiny atom that lay all day long under the white cover and sometimes kicked pink legs in the air and smiled at the sight of her.

This was an event that always brought a tender smile to her own lips. Little Carlo, though of minute size and not too robust of health, was quick to develop a decided personality of his own. Very early he learned that he was a treasure beyond price to one very lonely being, and by the time he was three months old he had learned to trade quite shamelessly on his pricelessness.

Dona had partially regained her strength by that time, and, the heat of the summer being past, she was able to push the perambulator with its clamorous occupant to and fro in the sunshine.

She always stayed near the Mill, since it was perpetual motion and not locality that appealed to little Carlo in his waking hours. Also, he liked the sound of the tumbling water under the bridge on which Dona often lingered. In a latent, wholly indescribable fashion they understood one another, just as Dona and the older Carlo had understood each other in earlier days. They both loved to watch the swooping flights of the swifts, and they both listened in the quiet of evening to the little whispering noises of the young ones under the eaves. Little Carlo was not a peaceful sleeper, but Dona never reproached him for that. When he awoke much too soon in the very early hours demanding the bottle which he considered his due, she would lift him tenderly from his cot beside her bed and hush and comfort him, even steal up and down the room with him if he were too insistent, but very, very softly lest Michael, in his attic adjoining, should be disturbed.

The parish-nurse, who still came in occasionally, and even Mrs. Conyers, with all her gentle motherliness, would have regarded such indulgence as highly inadvisable, but it was Dona's and Carlo's exclusive secret, or at least they imagined it was; and they never let anyone into their confidence. They were each other's special property and they clung to each other with a closeness that was in its way infinitely pathetic.

Mrs. Conyers and Michael looked on in compassionate silence. There was a mute alliance between them to make life easy for Dona, and they never discussed the situation. That she had gained sufficient strength to devote herself to her baby was at least something of an advance, and the fact that little Carlo's spirit, despite the strength of its personality, continued to inhabit a puny and altogether unsatisfactory body was one which no amount of discussion could improve. The parish-nurse, though full of expedients which were all faithfully tried in turn, shook her head disapprovingly whenever he was placed protestingly on the weighing-machine in the kitchen.

"A pity!" was her invariable verdict, and she never said more than that in the way of discouragement.

But it was quite enough. Dona knew that little Carlo was not thriving as other babies thrive, and though she continued to hope blindly for the best, her heart sank a little lower each time that her treasure was weighed in the balance.

Kitty, now a prosperous young matron, was the only person

who did not hesitate to speak her mind. Having had no practical experience of babies, she naturally had more to say upon the subject than anyone else.

"He doesn't seem to grow a bit, does he?" she would remark. "And he hasn't nearly such a pink colour as he had. It really was a tragedy that you couldn't nourish him yourself, my dear. Nothing in the world can take the place of maternal nutriment, if you know what I mean."

"He's very intelligent," Dona would answer swiftly. "He's really wonderful in his bath, knows just what's going to happen and hardly ever cries."

"That's a bad sign," Kitty would return sweepingly. "Babies ought to cry. It's their way of getting exercise. A baby of that age ought not to be too knowing. It only means that the brain is developing faster than the body, and is likely to end in meningitis. Now if I ever have a little one of my own"—she generally managed to look mysteriously expectant at this point—"I shall make it sleep all day long until it's at least six months old. Yes, you may sigh, my dear, but don't tell me that you haven't more strength of will than a tiny little thing like that if you try!"

And since Dona never argued, she always carried the day without difficulty.

"I think Dona spoils him," she said on one occasion to Mrs. Conyers. "Don't you agree with me?"

Mrs. Conyers' reply was disappointing to the visitor, but it sent a quick flush of surprise and gratitude to Dona's pale face. "I think," she said in her quiet way, "that if ever a mother's love could give her baby strength, little Carlo would very soon be the strongest baby in the world."

Kitty went away, feeling slightly affronted. She had been talking of practical things, not love.

During those summer months, there were changes going on at Everest. It had been in the hands of workmen ever since its purchase by Colonel Fontleigh's wife, and many improvements were being carried out. New kitchens and servants' quarters were being built, doubtless in order to fulfil Mrs. Dipper's sombre prophecy; and the whole place had begun to assume an air of prosperous modernity which in old Simon Garrett's time would have seemed most unsuitable.

Dona, wandering sometimes about the orchard-path beyond

The Old Cottage pushing little Carlo in the perambulator, would peep through the intervening trees and wonder. She never opened the gate that led thither though there was nothing to prevent her doing so. Old Spademoore still dug in the garden with slow perseverance, and he certainly would not have regarded her as an intruder. But even if little Carlo were asleep, she would not pass beyond that gate. Something restrained her; perhaps she herself could scarcely have said what.

More often she would linger in the overgrown garden of The Old Cottage, perhaps sit in the porch while little Carlo slumbered in the sunshine. He always called to her when he awoke, and she was always there to answer. But while he slept, she would sit in the shadow, knitting some tiny white garment for him with languid fingers and eyes that dreamed. And overhead from the thatched eaves the second broods of the swifts were trying their wings in preparation for the long flight.

CHAPTER II

THE PICTURE

SHE WAS sitting on the wooden bench in the shady little porch of The Old Cottage on the day that Mrs. Fontleigh found her. It was an afternoon of pure gold at the end of September. Both Dona and little Carlo were drowsy after an almost sleepless night; for teething troubles had begun and his baby strength was ill-fitted to meet them. He was still inclined to fret, but the generous afternoon sunshine had a comforting effect, and Dona was able at length to cease her gentle pushing to and fro of the perambulator and sit down herself in the shadow.

She was too weary to work, and sleep did not come to her, sorely as she needed it; but she leaned her head against the trellis frame-work and closed her tired eyes thankfully. Little Carlo was really sleeping at last; and after all, that was all that really mattered.

The world was full of the slumbrous buzzing of myriads of insects and from close at hand in the long grass came the machine-like whirring of grasshoppers. The swifts were still overhead, but they would soon be busy again. In the river-meadows the animals all lay and dozed.

Perhaps Dona dozed too, or perhaps it was only a deep sad reverie in which she was wrapped; but no sound of approaching footsteps reached her over the grassy path. It was rather the inner consciousness of another being near her than any outward signs that aroused her. But by some means that consciousness pierced her, and she looked up.

And in that moment in a sudden overwhelming flash of memory she was back in Cragstone Park and by her side was Garth to whom an elegant and gracious-looking woman was waving a greeting.

Garth—Garth! She stared, bewildered, instinctively looking for him. She had always known that they would meet again some day—had wondered what would happen—how she would face him.

Then, with an intensity of relief that made her feel momentarily giddy, she realised that Garth was not there. Only the tall, gracious woman who had waved her hand to him that day—Colonel Fontleigh's wife!

With an inarticulate murmur she struggled to her feet.

"Oh, don't get up!" said Mrs. Fontleigh. "You look so tired. I'm so sorry if I woke you."

Her voice had a low rich quality which somehow calmed Dona's embarrassment. She found herself looking up to eyes that regarded her with friendly interest and perhaps a hint of curiosity.

"I've seen you before, haven't I?" said Mrs. Fontleigh. "You are the child with the name that sounds like a flower—Dona Celestis, isn't that it?"

Dona's face was faintly flushed as she answered: "I am Dona Conyers now—Michael's wife."

Mrs. Fontleigh smiled at her; she had a very attractive smile. "Ah, so I heard!" she said. "Lucky Michael! And this—" she turned towards the perambulator with a very human gesture—"is this little Michael?"

"Oh no!" Dona spoke in a quick undertone. "That is little Carlo—my baby! I named him after—after—" she broke off, stooping forward over the sleeping child. "He isn't very well just now," she murmured. "The nurse says his teeth are beginning to worry him."

"He looks a darling," said Mrs. Fontleigh kindly. "I expect he means a great deal to you."

"Just—everything," said Dona under her breath. She added anxiously: "Do you think he's very tiny?"

"I daresay he'll grow—much faster than you expect him to," said Mrs. Fontleigh. "My last little boy started very small, and now he's a monster."

"How old is he?" asked Dona shyly.

"Seven now." Mrs. Fontleigh turned from her contemplation of little Carlo to look at his wistful young mother again. "You don't look too strong yourself," she said.

"I had rather a bad time when he came," said Dona simply. "But I'm better now—much better."

"Well, if you take my advice, you won't have any more at present," said Mrs. Fontleigh with her kindly smile.

Dona turned a vivid scarlet. "Oh, I shouldn't!" she said. "I mean—my little Carlo is all I want."

"That's right." Mrs. Fontleigh's eyes travelled considerably past her to The Old Cottage. "Get quite strong first! Now I wonder whether you could get me admittance to this place. I want to see if it could possibly be adapted for a playroom for my children."

"I can get you the key," said Dona.

"That would be very nice of you." Mrs. Fontleigh smiled at her again. "D'you think I could be trusted to look after your little Carlo while you went to fetch it? Don't hurry—because I'm sure he won't wake yet!"

"Of course I'll go!" said Dona.

"Don't hurry!" said Mrs. Fontleigh again. "There's always plenty of time in this delightful place."

But Dona went with a greater swiftness than she had achieved for many a day. She knew where the key was kept. It hung in Michael's office—a place she had not entered for months.

She saw, as she crossed the yard, that the door was open, and she ran in out of the glow of the sunlight, believing it to be empty. But ere she reached the nail on which the key was hanging, a sound at the writing-table told her of Michael's presence. She turned, panting, to explain.

"Mrs. Fontleigh—is waiting to see The Old Cottage. I've come—for the key."

And there she stopped with a groping movement towards him, for a sudden giddiness had come upon her, momentarily blinding her.

Michael's hands came out of the darkness and held her. "You shouldn't have run," he said, "in this heat. Let the woman wait!"

She leaned against him for a second or two, recovering her balance. Then: "I must go," she said. "I've left little Carlo."

Michael's hold tightened unexpectedly. She found herself pushed unceremoniously into a chair.

"You sit still," commanded Michael, "until you've got your breath! I'll take the key, and see to little Carlo."

"Oh, but——" she began in weak expostulation.

He overbore all protest with actual sternness. "Understand me, Dona! You can follow on slowly when you feel like it, but you're not to hurry. Don't let me see you like this again!"

He went out, leaving her there, still a little giddy, a little dazed, with a heart that throbbed and stood still with spasmodic uncertainty.

It was the thought of little Carlo that urged her two minutes later to collect her strength and get up from the chair into which she had been thrust. If he awoke, he might cry even with Michael there, and, whatever Kitty might say, she could not bear him to cry. She could not believe it was good for him.

But Michael's peremptory command had had its effect and she did not dream of disobeying it. She re-crossed the yard without haste and returned to The Old Cottage garden almost with an air of leisure. Secretly, in the depths of her heart, she was vaguely uneasy over her own weakness. Even if she had heard a cry from little Carlo, she was not sure that she could have run to him without falling.

But no sound came from his direction, and when she reached him at length she found him peacefully slumbering, with one tiny fist close to a flushed cheek as though to indicate his trouble even in unconsciousness.

The door of The Old Cottage was open, and she heard Michael's deep voice within, explaining something to the visitor. She paused in the porch, uncertain whether to enter or to remain where she was.

And so standing, she heard Mrs. Fontleigh speak in accents of amazement. "But this is an astounding piece of work! You tell me your wife did it?"

Michael answered on rather a dogged note. "She has a gift for this sort of thing. I believe she has sketched ever since she was a child."

"Astounding!" Mrs. Fontleigh said again. "And the face—why, I know it quite well!"

It was at this point that Dona overcame her hesitancy and entered.

They were standing in the middle of the studio. Mrs. Fontleigh had raised the covering cloth from the picture on the easel, and was gazing at the beautiful face of the woman whom Carlo had portrayed in miniature long ago.

They both turned at Dona's entrance, Michael to survey her with close criticism, Mrs. Fontleigh with a look of apology.

"My dear, I hope you will forgive me," she said, "but I had to

look behind the veil. I am afraid I am one of those tiresome people who always must."

"But of course!" Dona said, again feeling her embarrassment slip from her. "There's no reason why you shouldn't. Only—it isn't worth looking at, is it?"

"Not worth looking at!" repeated Mrs. Fontleigh warmly. "My child, there's not one artist in a thousand who could paint a picture like that without studying. It's an amazing piece of work—sheer genius. Now where do you get it from?"

Dona shook her head doubtfully. "I think from dear Carlo. He taught me a little long ago, and Miss Armitage gave me some lessons too."

"Oh!" Mrs. Fontleigh spoke in a tone of enlightenment. "I see. That was in return for that last picture she did, I suppose—Pan's pool, wasn't it called? It's in this year's Academy."

She paused, for Michael had turned away and Dona had flushed so noticeably and so painfully that it was evident that the subject was an unwelcome one.

She turned from it with the ready skill of one who knew how to deal with delicate situations. "Poor Miss Armitage! Her death was very tragic—really terrible for her poor husband." She glanced towards Michael's unyielding back and decided that further measures must be adopted swiftly. "I must admit I never greatly cared for her work. But this—this is quite wonderful. And I am sure I know that face. Who is it, my dear?"

Dona answered in a very low voice. "I can't tell you. I took it from a miniature—one that Carlo did. There was no name to it."

"Carlo! And who was he?" questioned Mrs. Fontleigh, wondering if she were again on the edge of a quicksand, but hoping for the best.

"Carlo Peregrine—the artist," explained Dona. "My—my guardian. He died—here in this house—when I was only a child."

"Oh, I remember him!" said Mrs. Fontleigh. "He had a great vogue for a short time as a portrait-painter. But he was something of a meteor. He didn't last." She looked thoughtful.

"That face! Where have I seen it before?" She looked at Dona.

"Except for the colouring—" she said, and stopped.

"I don't know who she is," Dona said, and Michael turned round and surveyed her as though there were something in her

voice with which he was not quite familiar. "I can show you the miniature if you care to see it, but I haven't got it here. It's up at the house."

"No. Wait a minute!" said Mrs. Fontleigh, and closed her eyes. "It's coming. I shall be able to tell you directly. But you've altered it somehow—idealised it—spiritualised it. Ah! Now I know!" She looked again at the picture. "That is Princess Maria Valcari of Casiliano. I am certain of it. I haven't seen her for years, but I couldn't be mistaken."

Dona had begun to tremble a little. "Oh, tell me about her!" she said.

Mrs. Fontleigh turned back to her. "You have never heard of her? No, she was before your day. You wouldn't. She was the loveliest woman in Europe, so everyone said; Italian by birth and then married when very young to Prince Valcari, a rather terrific person—absolute and undefiable monarch of an independent state of Southern Europe—years older than herself, who wanted an heir, which, by the way, she failed to provide. He is dead now, and I believe Casiliano has been absorbed into Italian territory since; anyhow it is independent no longer and has no prince."

"And she?" questioned Dona almost in a whisper.

"She is still alive; enormously wealthy, I believe, and living in Paris, or somewhere near. But, as I say, I haven't seen her for years—ten at least, and I never knew her personally. She has probably altered a good deal." Again Mrs. Fontleigh turned to the picture. "But this is a wonderful conception. It speaks. You really ought to develop such a talent. Don't you agree, Mr. Conyers?"

"That depends," said Michael.

She gave him a keen look. "What on—if you don't mind my asking?"

"On Dona herself," he answered with deliberation.

"Or on you?" questioned Mrs. Fontleigh with a half-smile.

He made a slight movement of the shoulders that could scarcely be called a shrug. "No, not on me. She is mistress of her own actions entirely."

"Really?" said Mrs. Fontleigh with a hint of incredulity. Somehow this black-browed man did not have the appearance of being quite as modern and easy-going as his words implied. "Well, in that case I needn't ask your permission before trying

to persuade her to take up art seriously. For to waste such a talent as this would be downright wicked in my opinion." She turned back to Dona. "I assure you I am very much in earnest. You have a great gift and it ought to be developed."

"A great gift!" echoed Dona as though hardly comprehending the words.

"I am sure of it," said Mrs. Fontleigh, and her eyes dwelt upon the girl's beautiful face half in curiosity and half in doubt. "You don't look strong enough for a very active life," she remarked. "Wouldn't it be a great joy to you to study and—perhaps—become famous?"

Dona's look sought Michael's as it were instinctively, but he did not meet it. He was staring sombrely at the canvas on the easel and his countenance was quite inscrutable. She answered rather tonelessly. "I don't know."

"No?" Mrs. Fontleigh smiled, checked for the moment but by no means baffled. "Well, I should think it over if I were you—both of you think it over. Meantime, I am going back to town to-morrow. I wonder if you would care to entrust this treasure of yours to me for a little while. I would take it with me and get a really expert opinion about it—as well as advice. Will you do that?"

Just for a second Dona hesitated. "It's hardly finished," she said.

Mrs. Fontleigh laid a gently persuasive hand on her shoulder. "My dear, no work of art ever is," she said, "at least in the eyes of its creator. Let me have it as it is and see what can be done!"

Dona looked up at her. It was impossible not to feel the attraction of those kindly eyes. "It's very, very kind of you," she said slowly. "Of course you can take the picture—if you think it's worth it. But—I could never leave my baby. You know that, don't you?"

Her words were hardly uttered when a small cry came from the garden, and in an instant she was gone, darting out through the open door into the sunshine with a rapidity which Michael would have condemned had he had time. They heard her cooing over the child with tender soothing words, and they looked at one another for a moment with a curious veiled sympathy which was beyond the reach of words.

"Poor little soul!" said Mrs. Fontleigh gently. "Well, I will

send round for the picture if you have no objection. It seems too much of a pity to leave it here."

"I have no objection," said Michael, the dogged note still in his voice. "It's very good of you to take the trouble."

"I am very much interested," said Mrs. Fontleigh simply. "I think myself that she has genius. Some day it might be a source of great happiness to her."

Michael spoke with slow force. "I have always," he said, "wanted her to be happy in her own way."

Mrs. Fontleigh smiled her pleasant smile in answer. "Somehow I think she will be," she said. "And it will be mainly thanks to you."

CHAPTER III

THE LONG FLIGHT

NO WORD regarding Mrs. Fontleigh passed between Dona and Michael after the visitor's departure. Little Carlo was restless and inclined to fret, and he occupied the whole of Dona's attention. When Mrs. Conyers offered to give him his evening bath, she shook her head.

"No, thank you. I would rather. He might cry for me."

It was true. Little Carlo was in a mood to cry on the faintest provocation, and it took Dona's utmost ingenuity to keep the tears at bay.

"She looks worn out," Mrs. Conyers said compassionately when she had carried the child away.

"She is," said Michael briefly.

He was filling his pipe, and his face as he bent over his task was uncompromisingly stern.

Mrs. Conyers sighed. "Poor lamb! I would take the babe at night, only she can't bear to be parted from him."

"I know," Michael said, turning to the mantelpiece for matches. He added as though to himself, without looking round: "It's damnable."

"Poor lamb!" Mrs. Conyers said again. "What ever will she do without him? Nurse Wilkins says there's not a chance."

Michael made an inarticulate sound, still with his back turned.

Mrs. Conyers got up and began to clear the table. "It seems so hard," she said, "when she has been through so much, but the Lord knows best. We can only leave it to Him."

Michael was silent. He lit his pipe and stood staring down into the kitchen fire while he smoked.

"She looks so fragile," murmured Mrs. Conyers half to herself, "as if any fresh trouble would carry her away. She so clings to little Carlo. Oh, Mike," she turned towards him suddenly, "if only she would cling to you instead!"

He made an abrupt movement, but he did not look round.

After a moment: "'If wishes were horses'—" he said rather gruffly, and left it at that.

Mrs. Conyers sighed again. "It seems such a waste somehow. Are you sure—Michael, couldn't you persuade her?"

"Afraid not," said Michael briefly. "I haven't a very persuasive nature."

Mrs. Conyers shook her head sadly over the answer. "Even a little insistence," she said, "might be better than nothing. She is your wife."

Michael turned then, with something of the swiftness of a goaded animal. "For heaven's sake, stop!" he said harshly. "You don't know what you're talking about!" And then more gently: "Sorry, Mother! But you don't quite understand, that's all. She's still only a child."

Mrs. Conyers stood looking at him with pity in her eyes. "I think it's you, my son, who don't understand," she said gently. "But perhaps it's yet too soon. Later on—afterwards——" she paused, and did not continue.

"Afterwards," said Michael in a voice from which all expression was rigidly excluded, "she will probably take up art. Mrs. Fontleigh was round this afternoon and thinks very highly of her work. Something will probably come of it."

"Oh, Mike!" his mother said, and clasped her hands involuntarily. "Then you will lose her!"

He turned to the door without violence but with something in his demeanour which seemed to indicate that he could not pursue the subject further. "Can I lose what I've never possessed?" he said very bitterly, and went out with a finality that supplied the answer he did not wait to hear.

From upstairs came the sound of Dona's voice softly crooning to her baby mingling with the low chatterings of the young swifts still clustering under the eaves. Perhaps they were discussing preparations for the long flight so soon to be undertaken. And now and then there came a weak wailing cry from little Carlo, as though all the busy machinery of life were too much for him.

The evening-bath seemed to have lost its attraction. He was tired and peevish, like an old man carrying a burden too heavy for his waning strength, and no effort on Dona's part could comfort or cheer him. Even the warm bottle of milk in which he usually found solace failed to-night to arouse his enthusiasm. He drank a

little and then, moaning, turned his head away. The cheek that had been lightly flushed in the afternoon was a bright scarlet now, and Dona viewed it with misgiving. But then, as Mrs. Conyers said, when babies were cutting their first teeth they were often feverish. If she could but get him to sleep, it might pass off.

Patiently she cuddled the poor little restless body to her and began to walk up and down, soothing him with soft words and low hummings. It was the treatment that little Carlo loved best, and presently it took effect. He sank to sleep still moaning faintly from time to time as though even in repose his trouble could not be wholly forgotten.

It was long ere Dona dared to lay him down in his cot by the side of her bed, and even then she would not leave him, but sat down close to him in the twilight, ready at the first sign of awakening to lift him again and pursue that long journeying to and fro over the uneven floor, always avoiding the places that creaked so that not even dear Mrs. Conyers should guess of the weary distances she travelled.

But to her relief little Carlo's uneasiness gradually merged into a deeper slumber. His moanings ceased, and his breathing, which had been light and fluttering, grew more regular. She lay down on the bed beside him and watched a moon of orange-gold rise in a mist-veiled sky.

And before her weary brain, all unbidden, there came a vision of the dream-woman whom Carlo had loved—the woman of her picture, around whom in the past she had woven such shining threads of romance. Calm and lovely, aloof, yet seeming to draw her with a mystic magnetism—a dream, yet not a dream—the unknown personality haunted her when she would fain have rested mind and body alike.

Princess Maria Valcari of Casiliano! The music of the name echoed in her memory, blending with the soft rippling murmur of the river beyond her window. No wonder Carlo had worshipped so exquisite a being! He had always adored beauty in all its forms.

Watching the moon rise higher and higher—like a glowing Chinese lantern against a curtain of impenetrable grey—she thought of the dim vast world beyond the curtain, and wondered—and dreamed. . . .

Mrs. Conyers came softly to her door with a cup of cocoa and some biscuits before she retired to bed. Little Carlo was still

asleep. They held a murmured colloquy together on the threshold, and Mrs. Conyers extracted the usual undertaking to be called if anything were needed. Then she kissed Dona and went away to the room in which Dona had slept before her marriage.

The last of the twilight had faded, but the light of the moon was enough. Dona undressed by it with infinite caution and presently slipped into bed. She felt too tired to say any prayers that night. It was only in times of respite such as this that she realised her utter weariness. The perpetual gnawing anxiety seemed to be eating into her very soul.

About an hour later she heard Michael knocking out his pipe against the fire-place in the kitchen, and then after a brief pause the quiet tread of his unshod feet on the bare oak stairs. He entered the tiny room that was next to hers, and she lay listening to his muffled movements beyond the door.

When they ceased, she pictured him lying down on that narrow bed, and sighed at the thought of his discomfort. Then, the silence continuing, she thought he must have fallen asleep and composed herself for slumber. Little Carlo was sure to wake in the early hours and she knew that she ought to rest while she could, in his interests as well as her own. Besides, the nights seemed so interminable lying awake by oneself.

Sleep was slow in coming, but it crept upon her at last, and she sank into a deep unconsciousness that held her like a spell.

The moon rose high in the heavens, sending a long shaft of light into the room. Down among the willows on the river-bank the owls were hooting to one another, and in the eaves the young swifts stirred and whispered, dreaming of the long flight.

In his cot beside the big bed little Carlo stirred restlessly, with vague murmurings, as if he realised that for once he was without the close attention of the one being on earth who was wont to study his lightest whim. He was not enjoying his sleep. It was mingled with shooting pains, now sharp, now faint, which stabbed him in unexpected places. He wanted to sleep, he clung to it; but, as the silver moon-rays streamed in and found his pillow, the solace of it was withdrawn. He awoke wide-eyed and whimpered.

For the first time Dona did not stir. She lay relaxed, most beautiful in her repose, her golden hair strangely gleaming in the moonlight.

Little Carlo's plaint grew louder. He began to brace himself for an outcry that could not be ignored. But ere he could summon his puny strength for the effort, something happened.

There came the creak of an opening door, and a big, square-shouldered figure strode barefooted across the floor. Little Carlo stared at it open-mouthed.

The intruder reached him, stooped over him, and little Carlo instinctively held out his tiny arms, beseeching to be lifted up.

The hands that raised him were strong and steady, and little Carlo nestled against a broad chest with a murmur of satisfaction in temporary forgetfulness of his troubles. There was something infinitely comforting in being borne up and down in arms that never faltered and with a tread that might have been pneumatic in its resilience.

Sometimes the old floor creaked a little, but such sounds were not enough to rouse the sleeper in the great moonlit bed. She lay almost like an effigy, fast bound in the sleep of exhaustion, with only the soft swelling and falling of her breast to show that she lived.

Slowly the bar of moonlight left her pillow and passed further down the room. Little Carlo had sunk to sleep, soothed by the comforting motion and the complete security of the arms that clasped him. But like a traveller upon an endless road Michael pursued his pilgrimage. To have attempted to lay the small throbbing bundle down again would have been to court disaster, nor had he any desire to do so. Like a sentry with no prospect of relief he kept up his monotonous journeying with the baby's head against his shoulder, his ear sometimes bent to catch the shallow uneven breathing, but his feet never pausing in their long slow march.

It was a full hour after his entrance that little Carlo suddenly awoke as if he had been stabbed and uttered a piteous wail. It reached the quiet sleeper, piercing the veil of sleep as perhaps no other sound could have pierced it.

In a moment Dona was sitting upright, her hand moving as by instinct towards the cot beside her. "My precious!" she said.

And then her half-dazed eyes took in Michael and his burden as he came towards her. She gave a startled gasp.

"He's all right," he said in his curtest tone. "I suppose it's time for his bottle, isn't it? I'll hold him while you get it."

"You!" said Dona. She had never seen her baby in Michael's arms before; she gazed at him as one in a dream.

Then little Carlo wailed again, and she collected herself swiftly and rose. "Oh, thank you—thank you!" she said rather incoherently. "I'll soon heat up his bottle. Are you sure you don't mind?"

"Go ahead!" said Michael briefly and continued his perambulations, partially soothing the infant in his arms thereby.

Dona lighted a candle and gave a faint exclamation of surprise. "Why, it's half an hour later than usual! Didn't he wake?"

"I walked him to sleep again," said Michael.

She turned aside and busied herself with a spirit-lamp on the floor. "Oh, you shouldn't!" she said.

Michael still tramped the room. "You were asleep. There was no point in your waking," he said.

Dona said no more. Kneeling there in her nightdress with her back to him, she appeared scarcely more than a child herself. But when she got up at length to take little Carlo from him, her eyes had a veiled look of mysterious womanhood.

"Thank you," she said again. "Please go and get some sleep yourself now! We shall be all right."

He gave the child into her arms, and paused. "I can stay if you like," he said abruptly.

She had gathered little Carlo to her breast and was rocking him with soft hushing sounds. He had begun to cry in earnest. Her dark eyes came up for a moment and met Michael's over the baby's head. "Oh no!" she said. "No! Please don't think of it!"

Her voice held a hint of distress; she turned almost instantly and sat down to give little Carlo his bottle.

Michael stood a second or two longer, watching; then sharply he turned round and went back to his room. He did not know that the dark eyes followed him with a mute distress until the door closed between them.

There was no more sleep for Dona that night, for though little Carlo dozed fitfully he was too uneasy for her to dare to relax her attention. When the morning came, chill and misty, she was still anxiously rocking him in her arms because he fretted whenever she tried to lay him down.

Mrs. Conyers came to her early with a cup of tea, and looked

with grave concern from the child's flushed face to Dona's pale one. But little Carlo with a flash of spirit received her with a crow of welcome that allayed her fears.

"He isn't really ill, is he?" urged Dona.

And Mrs. Conyers answered, albeit with deep misgiving: "He certainly seems a little brighter now."

She made Dona have her breakfast upstairs and would have taken charge of little Carlo so that she might rest but for her earnest prayer to be allowed to keep him.

The early chill turned to a cold rain that blotted out the hills and made the river-meadows all blurred and vague. There could be no question of going out, and Dona dressed but stayed in her room where Mrs. Conyers lighted a cheery wood fire. She did not dress little Carlo for he seemed too tired, though still occasionally he would display small flickerings of interest in his surroundings. There was a good deal of chattering going on under the eaves, as though some important event were at hand, and he noticed that and lay in his mother's arms watching for the spreading wings which had always fascinated him.

He did not sleep throughout the day, and now and then he cried, but not for long. Dona comforted herself with the thought that the pain was lessening, and though she dreaded the coming of night she failed to detect any disquieting symptoms as it approached. He was restless, but he did not seem to be ill. Anxious though she still was, she could see no immediate cause for anxiety. And as Mrs. Conyers said, a good night might make a lot of difference.

But it was with a heavy heart that Dona at length lay down. There was something about little Carlo's shallow breathing that reminded her of the other Carlo by whose side she had watched years ago on that evening when he had fallen asleep and had never waked again.

She propped herself up with cushions and pillows so that she could see into the cot, and she had a nightlight burning just beyond it, for the night was dark. Little Carlo had dropped into a doze, or she could not have laid him down, but it was not a restful slumber. She had a strong feeling that he might awake in pain at any moment; and this time she was determined that she would not sleep herself. That he might call to her and she not answer was an unendurable thought.

But her own weariness was greater than she knew, and in spite of her utmost resolution she sank to sleep at last. For a while she still took vague note of the baby's small uneasy movements, then a deeper slumber crept upon her which she was powerless to resist. Her lulled faculties became numb, and a dreamless oblivion overwhelmed her. . . .

What sound aroused her she knew not. It might have been a faint cry or the creaking of the cot. But in the dead of night she suddenly shook herself free from the muffling bonds of forgetfulness, and started upright in bed. Instinctively, before she was fully awake, her eyes turned to the cot; and in the dim light she saw something which sent a wild thrill of horror through her. Little Carlo's body was convulsed and heaving. The tiny features were livid and distorted; the eyes, widely staring, glassy and sightless. He seemed to be trying to cry out, but only the most piteous gasping escaped him.

Dona sprang from her bed and lifted him up. Immediately the small limbs stretched themselves into a rigid arch as though resisting her. It was the most terrible experience she had ever known. Desperately she tried to ease that awful rigour but without result, and the panting was growing more and more rapid with every second that passed. It was as though he were trying to get away, unconscious though he was, from some cruel grip that constricted him.

In an agony Dona found her own voice. "Michael—Michael—Michael!"

He was in the room almost before she knew it. It was as if he had been awaiting her call. In the dimness he looked immense, striding to her through the shadows.

"Give me the child!" he said, and took the poor, little struggling form from her.

"What is it? Oh, what is it?" gasped Dona in anguished distress.

He also tried for a few seconds to still the spasmodic writhing of the small frame, but without effect. "Fetch my mother!" he said.

She started to obey but the next moment he stopped her. "No, wait—wait! It's no good. See!"

Little Carlo had suddenly collapsed in his arms like a fluttering bird brought to earth. The spasm was past, the breathing stilled

"Michael!" Dona whispered. And in a louder tone: "Michael!"

In a whisper he answered her. "Don't you see? It's over. He's gone."

She hung over the child for a second or two, then looked swiftly up into his face. "D'you mean—he's dead?"

Her voice sounded strange even to herself, curiously harsh and grating, as though it fought some obstruction in her throat to which her hands went up instinctively as if she were choking.

Michael's eyes met hers for an instant only, then they went back to the limp burden in his arms. He nodded silently.

Dona pressed suddenly close. "Let me have him!" she said, and her voice was gone again, her words barely audible.

He gave the tiny motionless figure into her hold and turned aside as if he could not bear the sight.

Dona clasped it to her breast and sat down on the bed, rocking to and fro as one dazed.

Minutes passed, they might have been hours for all she knew, for her consciousness of time had faded utterly away. The only thing of which she was really aware was that the nameless dread which had over-shadowed her for so long had taken tangible form at last. The climax had been reached, and little Carlo—her little Carlo——

A hand touched her, a voice spoke very softly and compassionately above her head. "Dona—my poor lamb!"

She looked up into Mrs. Conyers' face, raising her head stiffly to do so, for it was as though a pressing weight had descended upon her.

She spoke, hardly knowing that she did so, mechanically, uttering words that had left her lips long ago by Carlo's bedside. "He'll be better when he wakes."

Mrs. Conyers stooped. "He will wake in heaven, darling," she said.

A gleam shone in the background, and Dona saw Michael standing in the doorway with a lamp. She turned and shut her eyes swiftly as if she feared what further light might reveal.

"Let me take him, darling!" urged Mrs. Conyers. "We'll lay him in his cot."

A stab of pain seemed to pierce Dona; she shook her head, clasping the little lifeless body closer to her heart. "He's all I've got in the world," she said. "Let me keep him—a little longer!"

And then Michael came to her, sat down beside her and put a supporting arm around her. "Let him go, Dona!" he said.

The habit of obedience stirred within her. Her hold relaxed. She suffered Mrs. Conyers to take her precious burden from her. And then she sat, leaning against Michael, cold from head to foot, her empty hands lying open on her lap.

She spoke only once again that night and then it was as one in a trance. "The swallows were getting ready to fly yesterday," she said. "My little Carlo has gone with them."

CHAPTER IV

THE CHANCE

IT WAS a fortnight later that a car from Cragstone Park drove up the narrow lane that led to the Mill House and stopped at the gate to allow old Lady Fontleigh to descend.

She walked up the path in her stately unhurried fashion, surveying the dahlias on each side and the still-flowering bean-hedges beyond with a certain admiration. It was a cold autumn day and the sky was grey, which made the bright jumble of colours more welcome.

Reaching the old house, she paused in the porch and looked about her again ere she knocked with quiet precision. Some few moments elapsed before there was any response; then there came the sound of a slow movement within, and Mrs. Conyers opened the door.

Her face was tired and sad. She stood looking at her visitor as if she were not quite sure who she was.

Lady Fontleigh held out her hand. "It's Mrs. Conyers, isn't it? May I come in and talk to you for a few minutes?"

Mrs. Conyers gave her hand with the dignity that was natural to her. She had never spoken to Lady Fontleigh before, but she displayed no embarrassment. Her calm spirit was never taken at a disadvantage.

"Oh, do come in!" she said. "It's Lady Fontleigh of course. I ought to have known." She turned aside and opened the parlour-door. "I am afraid there's no fire. I hope you won't find it cold."

"No, no! It's very nice," Lady Fontleigh assured her. "I have always admired your house so much from a distance, but I have never been inside it. I hope you get good news of your son—Dr. Repton?"

"Please sit down!" said Mrs. Conyers. "Yes, I believe Garth is quite well, though I haven't seen him lately, and he is too busy to write often."

"You must be very proud of him," commented Lady Fontleigh.

"He is getting quite a celebrated man. I was so sorry to hear of his bereavement. I hope he is getting over it."

"I think so," said Mrs. Conyers. "Probably his work keeps him from thinking too much."

"Yes, it is a great asset," agreed Lady Fontleigh. "But it was a very sad business altogether, just as his wife was beginning to make her mark in the world of art too. Now what about your other daughter-in law? She is an artist too, I hear."

She smiled at Mrs. Conyers, but there was no answering smile on the latter's face. "Dona?" she said. "My poor little Dona is ill."

"Ill? Not seriously, I hope?" Lady Fontleigh's expression changed to one of deep concern.

Mrs. Conyers shook her head. "I think it is more of the soul than the body," she said. "but we are very anxious about her."

"Why, what has happened?" questioned Lady Fontleigh. "My son's wife saw her less than three weeks ago—in the garden, with the baby. Oh!" with sudden intuition. "It's not the baby, is it?"

"Yes," Mrs. Conyers answered, and her eyes were full of tears. "The baby died."

"I'm so very sorry," said Lady Fontleigh.

Mrs. Conyers turned her face aside and wiped the tears away. "I'm sure it was best. The Lord always knows. And we never thought he would live very long. But—dear little Dona——" She could not finish.

"How terribly sad!" said Lady Fontleigh gently. "Do you know I hadn't heard of it? And she is ill, you say? But she is young. Surely she will get over it!"

"I don't know." With an effort Mrs. Conyers answered her. "She has the artistic temperament, and she takes things so to heart. It seems to have torn her whole life past mending."

"Poor girl!" said Lady Fontleigh. "But she has her husband to comfort her. She will get better presently."

"I don't know," Mrs. Conyers said again. "She hasn't much strength. We got the doctor to prescribe for her, but he could only suggest a change, while she—poor lamb—only wants to be left alone."

"Ah! A change!" said Lady Fontleigh, with sudden animation. "Well now, let me tell you what I have come about! It may be

the very thing for her—to give her back her balance, as it were. Possibly I have come just at the right moment.”

Mrs. Conyers turned back; she had mastered her emotion, but her eyes were still misty. “It’s very kind of you, Lady Fontleigh, to be so interested in her,” she said. “You mustn’t think me ungrateful, but I’m dreadfully afraid that nothing will make much difference now.”

“Oh, don’t lose heart!” said Lady Fontleigh very kindly. “Wait and let me tell you about it! It may be the silver lining to the cloud. My daughter-in-law of course told me all about her and what she rightly considers her wonderful talent. She now writes to say that the picture she took up to town with her has been seen by one of the highest authorities on that type of work, and his opinion is that it is quite an outstanding specimen and that if she would only take up art and study seriously, she should go far. Now my daughter-in-law is very anxious to help her in this respect—to give her her chance. It was not a mere fancy on her part. She has real discernment, and she was so deeply struck with Dona’s work that she feels it would be sheer waste if she did not have her opportunity. She tells me that your son very generously promised that he would not stand in her way; so, Mrs. Conyers, if you would bring your influence to bear I feel sure that something might be accomplished which would be of real help to her.” Lady Fontleigh had warmed to her subject and spoke with some enthusiasm, but now she paused for a moment. “Tell me what you think about it all!” she said.

Mrs. Conyers hesitated. “I hardly know what to say,” she said. “It isn’t fair for me really to say anything. I don’t like to think of her going from us, chiefly for Michael’s sake.”

“But if it were for her good!” urged Lady Fontleigh gently.

“I know. We must put her first,” agreed Mrs. Conyers. “She has been through so much, and we are so anxious about her. It would be selfish to keep her from anything which might bring her a little comfort.”

“It’s very unselfish of you to put it like that,” said Lady Fontleigh. “What my daughter-in-law offers to do is this. My son is abroad on a Government mission, and she is in their town flat with the youngest boy until the winter holidays when they are all coming down to Everest for a family reunion. If you and your son could spare Dona to her until that time, she might gain some valu-

able experience to set her on her way. I must tell you," Lady Fontleigh smiled in her pleasant way, "that my daughter-in-law has taken a great fancy to Dona. She considers her beauty quite remarkable, and I need not say that she would take the utmost care of her."

"She is most kind," Mrs. Conyers said. "I don't myself think that Dona would be fit for any real work, but so long as she understood that——"

"Of course she would understand!" Lady Fontleigh assured her. "Dona would do as much or as little as she felt inclined. Even if she did nothing at all beyond visiting a few picture galleries, it would take her mind off her present trouble and perhaps later she would find the experience of benefit. I wonder if you would let me see her myself and tell her of the scheme."

"She is upstairs resting," Mrs. Conyers said. "I make her lie down in the afternoon. She is always so tired. But I daresay she is not asleep. I'll go and see."

She left the room, and for the next ten minutes Lady Fontleigh sat in the chilly parlour, patiently waiting, too benevolently intent upon her errand to resent the delay. At the end of that time there came the tread of a man's feet in the passage, the door opened rather abruptly, and Michael looked in.

He raised his black brows at sight of the visitor, half drew back, and then sharply checked himself and entered.

Lady Fontleigh rose to meet him with extended hand. "It's Mr. Conyers, I know. How do you do? Please stay if you can spare the time and let me tell you what has brought me here!"

"Perhaps I can guess," Michael said as he shook hands. "It's to do with my wife."

"Yes." Lady Fontleigh swiftly decided to make an ally of him with the least possible delay. "You met my daughter-in-law, did you not, two or three weeks ago, and you were good enough to say then that you would raise no obstacle to any scheme that might be evolved for the development of her artistic talent. I am very grieved to hear that since then you have had so sad a loss."

Michael's eyes lowered unexpectedly; he made a half-turn towards the window. "It was bound to happen," he said rather curtly. "The baby never had any strength."

"And your wife is heart-broken. I am terribly sorry," said Lady Fontleigh. "I know my daughter-in-law will be too." She

paused a moment; then: "I am hoping that her plan may be of some small help," she said, "if you can bring yourself to consent to it."

"I?" Michael turned back so suddenly that she started. "I'll consent to anything under the sun," he said forcibly, "that's going to help her."

"Ah! How good of you!" said Lady Fontleigh.

He contradicted her bluntly. "No, it isn't. I want to save her reason, that's all."

"Her reason!" said Lady Fontleigh.

"Yes, her reason!" Stubbornly he reiterated the word. "She's on the verge of melancholia. My mother and I both know it. The doctor doesn't realise how serious it is. I know—because I'm always watching her—always on the look-out. She's cried herself nearly blind." He stopped as suddenly as he had begun, and stood facing the visitor almost defiantly, his throat curiously working.

Lady Fontleigh immediately took her cue, somewhat startled though she was. "Oh, but how sad!" she said. "Poor girl—poor girl! Something must be done to help her."

Michael's hands were clenched. "I would do anything," he said, with a sort of sombre vehemence. "But—it isn't in my power. I can't make her forget her misery."

"Only time will do that," said Lady Fontleigh gently. "We must give her time for the wound to heal, Mr. Conyers. And while it is healing we must try and build up her strength so that when reactions come—as they inevitably do—she will be more fitted to face them. Do you think you could bear to part with her for a little while? My daughter-in-law who is now in town would so like to have her, and I know you can trust her to take the utmost care of her. She would divert her mind from all this sadness, get her interested in pictures and art. At least, that is what she wants to do—if Dona could be persuaded to go to her. Couldn't you persuade her possibly?"

"I don't know," Michael said; he dug his hands deep into his pockets as if to try and hide any sign of emotion, but his throat still betrayed him a little. "You're very kind to think of it."

"It isn't my thought," said Lady Fontleigh. "And of course I couldn't lend my support unless I were sure of your approval. But I have that, have I not?"

This was a subtle move on her part which sent a rather cynical flicker into Michael's eyes. There was no subtlety in his reply. "Anything on earth that might help her has my approval. Anything on earth that could give her an interest in life would be beyond price so far as I'm concerned. At the present moment she has no desire to live, and——" his voice sank almost to a whisper—"I sometimes think it's cruel to try and make her."

"Mr. Conyers!" said Lady Fontleigh, and laid a hand of swift sympathy upon his arm. "You mustn't say that. Surely—she has you to live for!"

He looked at her with a kind of dumb urgency, and suddenly his hard mouth quivered, as though the sympathy of this stranger were too much for him. For a second or two he stood motionless, then he pulled his hand from his pocket and grasped the friendly one upon his arm.

"Save her for me!" he whispered huskily. "Do anything—but save her for me—if you can!"

There came a sound outside, and sharply he turned and walked to the window as the door re-opened.

Mrs. Conyers entered alone. "I am so sorry," she said. "I have been talking to Dona, but she begged that you would excuse her coming down, Lady Fontleigh. As a matter of fact," her voice shook a little, "she has been crying a good deal this afternoon—she can't help it, poor lamb, it's her state of health—and she isn't fit to see anyone. But she thanks you very, very much for your kind suggestion, and says that perhaps a little later on—when she is better——"

She stopped. Michael had swung back from the window. His face was set and determined. He came to his mother's side, and spoke very firmly.

"No, Lady Fontleigh, not later on—now. If you will follow up your great kindness and make the necessary arrangements I will undertake that my wife will be ready to go to Mrs. Fontleigh as soon as it suits her to have her. If there is any difficulty about the journey, I will take her myself."

"Michael!" Mrs. Conyers said.

Lady Fontleigh gently took the situation in hand. "I quite understand, Mr. Conyers, and I think it is a wise and very generous decision on your part. I am going up to London next week, and I will take her. I promise you that she shall be cared

for as if she were one of the family, and I think you will find that, even if the change may be unwelcome to her in anticipation, it will probably prove to be the turning-point. Anyhow, we can but try." She turned to Mrs. Conyers. "Your son sees the matter in the same light as I do myself. Do accept my assurance that it will be the very best thing possible for your poor little Dona, and bring your influence also to bear! Don't let her hang back! It is evidently of the greatest importance that she should be roused from this tragic sorrow of hers."

Mrs. Conyers looked from one to the other very gravely and at length slowly spoke. "Perhaps you are right, Lady Fontleigh," she said. "It isn't for me to say. God's hand has always been over her, and He will not forsake her now. But—" her voice trembled again—"I don't know what my son will do without her."

"Leave me out of it!" Michael broke in almost roughly.

And: "I don't think he will be the loser in the end," said Lady Fontleigh gently. "Unselfish people never are."

CHAPTER V

THE WAITING

"SHE doesn't want to go," said Mrs. Conyers that evening.

"She's got to go," was Michael's brief rejoinder.

His mother faced him steadily. "You wouldn't make her leave you, Mike, if she didn't want to."

He met her look with down-drawn brows. "Leave *me!*" he said; and then curtly: "I'll talk to her."

"Wait till to-morrow!" Mrs. Conyers urged.

But Michael did not stay to hear; he was already at the door. He went up the stairs with long purposeful strides, taking two at a time, and came to Dona's room. His mother had left the door half-open, and he barely paused on the threshold. "Can I come in?" he said, and entered.

Dona was lying on her bed. A candle was burning by her side, but her face was turned from it. She moved her head languidly at his approach, and the light fell upon features so pale and sharpened by suffering that it was almost as if they already bore the stamp of death. Her eyes, enormous in their deep shadows, looked up at him with a kind of weary wonder, too tired for emotion.

He came to the bedside, and stood looking down upon her. "Are you worse to-night?" he said.

She breathed a slow sigh, seeming to gather her strength before answering. "No. But I didn't come down because I wasn't hungry. Mrs. Conyers brought me some milk. I've had that."

"And she has been telling you all about Lady Fontleigh's visit," said Michael.

Again there was a perceptible pause before she answered: "Yes. Isn't it kind of them?"

"But you don't want to go?" he said.

Dona's eyes left his face, and seemed to wander strangely down some long dreary vista that stretched far beyond the walls of the room. It was her eyes that troubled him most in these days. They

were so obscure, so aloof in their forlorn searching, as though incapable of dwelling upon any finite object for long at a time.

"It wouldn't be much good," she said. "I shall never paint again."

The heavy lids drooped with the words, but they lifted again with an effort when Michael spoke with sudden force.

"Never mind that! Dona, I want you to go."

"Do you?" Her eyes came up again to his, pathetically, appealingly, but she said no more than that.

He stood his ground, though somehow he seemed to find it harder than he had expected. "I don't often interfere," he said, and his voice had the dogged note which always indicated insistence with him. "When I do, it's because I must. I can't let you go on like this any longer, and this is a chance which we mustn't let slip. It'll be a help to you, Dona."

"Will it?" she said.

He took a firmer stand, urged thereto by a desperate sense of his own impotence to stay the ravaging hand that had been laid upon her. "You're young," he said. "You mustn't let your opportunities go by. They may never come again."

"Nothing ever comes again," said Dona.

He made a sharp movement of protest. "Child, you're not old enough to say that!"

"I am getting old," Dona said.

He bent a little to look more closely into the wasted face. "You!" he said. "You're not nineteen yet."

"Age doesn't count," she said, and again her eyes fell away from his and resumed their long fruitless quest down a path invisible to him.

She looked almost unearthly lying there; and a sudden fierce emotion surged through him. He drew back from her with a hint of violence.

"Well, it's settled," he said, and there was a harshness in his voice that he could not subdue. "I have told Lady Fontleigh that you will go, and it's the only thing to be done. You'll be glad afterwards."

"Afterwards," murmured Dona vaguely as if to herself.

He stood a pace away gazing at her. There was something uncontrolled, fiercely electric, about him in that moment. But those sad drooping eyes that searched perpetually without hope of

finding somehow checked that which the man himself might have failed to repress. He swung round slowly at length, and slowly left her.

And as the door closed, Dona turned her wan face into the pillow with a low, tearless sob. "Afterwards—" she whispered again—"afterwards!"

A week later her childish ambition was fulfilled, and she left the long-familiar scenes behind her to go out into an unknown world. Submissive and vaguely preoccupied, she accepted the decision which had been made for her and took an almost silent farewell of the two whose name she bore.

"She'll soon be better," were Lady Fontleigh's parting words.

To which Mrs. Conyers made mournful reply when she had been carried out of hearing. "Yes, if only she forgets to cry at night."

Michael said nothing. He simply went back to his work.

And then there came a time of waiting which each bore characteristically in almost unbroken silence.

Michael seemed to grow more and more taciturn and self-contained in these days. He seldom went beyond the confines of the Mill, and, except to give orders, he hardly spoke. He did not actually avoid his mother's society, but he took to spending hours in the evening sitting in his dreary office, smoking and poring over papers and accounts. Sometimes he would remain there until after one o'clock at night, and Mrs. Conyers would be listening till she heard him come in and lock up and go slowly up the stairs. There was one circumstance which vaguely troubled her. He never went direct to his own room as had been his custom, but always approached it through the room that now was Dona's, and once or twice she found an impress on the counterpane the next day as though he had flung himself across it and lain there. But his aspect was always the same in the daytime, and she did not like to question him. There had been reserves in Michael from his babyhood which she had never penetrated.

His pride also was a thing beyond her understanding. His acceptance of the Fontleights' kindness puzzled her sorely. It was true that he had stipulated that any artistic training was to be at his expense, but, save for that and a sum of twenty-five pounds which he had compelled Dona to take for her wardrobe, he had raised no objection to the plan which had so completely

removed her from his keeping. Mrs. Conyers could not understand his attitude though she sometimes suspected that the renunciation had cost him a good deal. He was a man who made his own decisions with absolute independence. He would do what he thought fit, and somehow—whatever it might involve—he would do it without loss of dignity. No one—not even Garth—had ever regarded Michael Conyers with contempt.

What he suffered—if he suffered even—during those lonely weeks she never definitely knew. The mask-like reticence with which he faced the world was beyond even his mother's power to pierce. She could only wonder with an aching heart.

Dona wrote to her, never to Michael, though she never failed to ask after him. Her first letters were brief, and to Mrs. Conyers, unsatisfactory, accounts of herself and her surroundings. She never mentioned her health unless strongly urged to do so, and then she always wrote: "I think I am better," and turned to another subject. Mrs. Fontleigh, she would often say, was being far too kind, and London was wonderful—wonderful! She was not doing very much, as Mrs. Fontleigh made her rest a good deal, but they went out every day and saw something different. The picture-galleries filled her with a kind of awed rapture which could not be put into words. She did not attempt to convey to Mrs. Conyers anything of the atmosphere in which she lived. Perhaps she realised her inability to do so.

But there was one thing she spoke of which brought a gleam of comfort to Mrs. Conyers' anxious heart, and that was the fact that Dona had formed a close friendship with little Robin, Mrs. Fontleigh's youngest boy.

"We often take each other into the Park," Dona wrote, "and though I can't play with him much, he understands, and we tell each other stories instead."

A week or two later she wrote that she was trying to paint Robin's portrait. Mrs. Fontleigh was so pleased with the idea, and it would be a very small return for all her kindness.

It was soon after this that Mrs. Fontleigh herself wrote to Michael—a very friendly and sympathetic letter which he handed to his mother without comment.

"I think I may safely say that your dear little Dona is coming back to life at last. It reminds me somehow of the awakening of

the Sleeping Beauty. Her physical health is certainly greatly improved, and she is looking very lovely. I do not think that she cries any more when she is alone, and she is really beginning to take an interest in things. I have a plan to take her to Paris for a week—as my guest, of course—to see some of the galleries there. I do hope you will give your consent, for I believe it would do her a great deal of good. Perhaps you might like to run up and see her for a night before we go. Our flat is not very large, but I could squeeze a chair-bedstead into Dona's room if you would not mind that, and I should be very pleased to see you."

Mrs. Conyers looked up from the letter. "Will you go, Mike?"

He rose from the breakfast-table. "No," he responded shortly.

"Wouldn't you like to see Dona?" ventured Mrs. Conyers.

"Not under those conditions," said Michael, beginning to fill his pipe with his back to her.

Mrs. Conyers sighed, but she did not press the point. "You'll let her go to Paris?" she asked.

"Of course! Why not?" said Michael.

And that was all that passed on the subject, save that later he mentioned that he had written to Mrs. Fontleigh, but he did not detail the contents of his letter.

It seemed to Mrs. Conyers that Dona was growing very far away from them, but the process had saved her life and she could not repine. She could only look forward to the promised reunion at Christmas, and strive to drive away the heavy foreboding that haunted her. For, despite all her efforts, she could not rid herself of a constantly recurring doubt concerning the future. There was something about Michael that made her think of a chained animal, and she could not somehow bring herself to believe that when Dona returned the old relationship between them could be resumed. In her heart she did not desire it, but she dreaded the thought of any sudden change which might bring distress to Dona. Once it had seemed to her possible, and she had earnestly prayed, that Michael might win her love as he had won her trust, but her prayers had not been granted. Circumstances had parted them just at the time when she had most hoped that they might have been drawn together, and now she was afraid.

When Dona came back from all her new experiences, would she be changed? Did she ever remember even now that Michael had

given her all he had and claimed nothing in return? Had she wholly forgotten that Michael was her husband? And—if she had—would he ever burst the shackles with which he had bound himself and bring it to her mind?

It sometimes seemed to Mrs. Conyers, though she could not have said wherefore, that those shackles were beginning to wear thin.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEW WORLD

IT HAD all been such an amazing experience to Dona that wonder had almost worn itself out. At first, she had been disposed to take but small notice of any happenings. Still wrapped in her grief and too ill for exertion, she had left herself in Mrs. Fontleigh's hands. But gradually, by imperceptible stages, a change had set in. The novelty of her surroundings had penetrated her consciousness almost without her knowing it, and the tide of physical strength that had ebbed so low had turned at last. Little by little her youth had asserted itself, interest had reawakened, her sorrow had sunk below the surface of things. It was not gone, but it was no longer perpetually uppermost in her mind. She had taken her first draught of Nature's healing medicine.

Her friendship with the seven-year-old Robin Fontleigh was another factor which did much to distract her thoughts. Possibly it was her beauty that first attracted the child, combined with that gentleness of demeanour which had always characterised her; but he did not wait for any overture from her. With large-hearted confidence he accepted her as an inmate of his mother's household, and within a week they were close friends. In a sense they were nearer to each other than Dona could ever be to her hostess. There was a bond of youthful sympathy between them which only utter unsophistication could have forged. In some ways Dona's knowledge of the world was even less than that of her child-companion, and the simplicity of her nature was such that she found pleasure in a great many of his amusements.

Mrs. Fontleigh looked on with amusement and satisfaction which turned to real elation on the day that Dona made her first portrait-study of Robin. From that day onward she felt no further anxiety with regard to her charge.

The portrait was nearly finished before she broached the subject of a week in Paris. She had received Michael's reply to her letter and was able to tell Dona that her husband had given his per-

mission. But she was somewhat disappointed at Dona's acceptance of the news.

"You would like to go, my dear?" she said. "I am going myself, and I want a companion."

"You are very, very kind," Dona said. "Of course I should like it very much."

But she did not speak with great enthusiasm, and Mrs. Fontleigh thought that her eyes looked wistful.

"I am afraid Robin must stay behind," she said, "but it is only for a week after all. Old Nurse will take care of him. I should like you to see Paris, Dona; and after that—who knows?—we may be able to make some plans for the future."

Dona said nothing. She never spoke of the future, and Mrs. Fontleigh often wondered at her reticence. She did not tell Dona that Michael had declined her invitation to spend a night with them before they left. Some instinct restrained her from doing so. She had noticed that Dona never voluntarily spoke of her husband, and she sometimes suspected her of being homesick. There was something which she realised to be beyond her understanding in the situation, but she was of too generous a nature to attempt to probe a secret which had not been confided to her. She had become very fond of Dona, and she was determined to give her every advantage in the short time at her disposal. There was always the possibility that her opportunities might be extended if only Dona could be induced to show some inclination in that direction.

The painting of Robin's portrait had been undertaken mainly as a token of gratitude, as Mrs. Fontleigh was well aware; but it displayed the same touches of genius as had characterised the first picture, and there was no question as to the eagerness which had reawakened in Dona as she worked. In Mrs. Fontleigh's opinion it augured well for further enterprises, but she was careful to say nothing in that respect. It might well be that Christmas would put an end to all chance of a professional training, but she was firmly resolved to do her utmost to prevent such a calamity, and she had a shrewd idea that Michael might be persuaded to support her.

There was that about Dona—her beauty, her sadness—which made it impossible not to be deeply interested in her, and if Dona's own ambition were still dormant, she had become ambitious on

Mrs. Fontleigh's behalf. It might be that Paris art might do for her what London art had failed to do.

So on a bleak morning in November they boarded the steamer for Calais, and Dona found herself embarked upon a further voyage of discovery in the unfamiliar world which Carlo had known so well.

The experience was one which she was to remember all her life. The sea was dead calm, but they were very soon wrapped in a thick fog which made normal progress impossible. They eventually reached Calais after three hours of nervous questing which Mrs. Fontleigh declared to be the most unpleasant experience of her life.

But it had not been unpleasant to Dona. The novelty of the crossing robbed it of all terrors, and she was keenly interested in her surroundings. For the first time she forgot the past and found the present all-absorbing.

Their eventual arrival in Paris gave her almost a sense of unreality. It was so totally different from anything she had ever imagined, and the chatter all around her in a foreign language made her feel as if she had entered another sphere. Mrs. Fontleigh's complete *savoir-faire* and ability to deal with the situation filled her with admiration. She was lifted out of herself to an extent which was almost bewildering and she looked on with a giddy sense of perpetual astonishment.

Within two days she was dazzled afresh with the glories of sculptured art, and before she knew it she had been swept into such a vortex of amazed enthusiasm in the picture galleries through which Mrs. Fontleigh conducted her that selection seemed impossible. She could only beg to go again and again until the artistic hunger within her was temporarily appeased.

That week was to be a lurid memory to her for all time. It was the awakening of all that was æsthetic within her. She was so sated with beauty that she could think and dream of nothing else.

The days and nights flew past on magic wings. Time had ceased to be of any account. Past griefs and future problems were alike forgotten. She was as one consumed by a fever that gave her no respite.

Mrs. Fontleigh was delighted with the change in her, and even prolonged their stay in consequence. The Hôtel d'Anjou in which they were domiciled was smaller and quieter than most and

patronised but little by the ordinary tourist. The people who came and went were mainly French people of the higher class. They also held a deep interest for Dona though her lack of knowledge of the language precluded any possibility of intercourse. But the waiter who attended them in the *salle-à-manger* spoke English, and since *la petite madame* had won his heart from the onset, being "*si belle et si gentille*", he made it his business to keep her informed as to the rank and profession of her fellow-guests, accompanied by any other details which he considered appropriate for her delicate ears.

And so it was that one night with an air of great importance he stooped over her with the fish and murmured close to the golden head: "We are expecting a princess to-night, *madame*."

Dona looked up in swift surprise. "Really? An English princess?"

"No, *madame*, no, not English." He chuckled mysteriously. "And not French either, *madame*! But a princess out of a fairy-tale—*très, très magnifique*!"

Dona was deeply interested, while Mrs. Fontleigh smiled and murmured that it was all a matter of opinion and she wondered very much if their tastes and that of the attentive Guillaume would coincide.

When he arrived with the next course he imparted further details. The fairy princess would not descend before nine o'clock. That was her dinner-hour, chosen no doubt in order to secure individual attention; but his ladies could linger over their coffee if they felt so disposed in order to see her, and they would be well repaid. But she was exquisite—this princess, the last cry in beauty and grandeur, as they would see if they cared to remain.

"And what is her name?" asked Mrs. Fontleigh.

But Guillaume was called away before he had time to answer.

To please Dona they dawdled through the meal, and when it was ended sat over dessert and coffee much later than usual in order to get a glimpse of the celebrity. Other people had finished and drifted away, and the *salle-à-manger* was practically empty when Guillaume suddenly hurried up to them.

"The princess is about to enter!" he announced dramatically.

Dona's eyes went to the door.

"Don't look too hard!" whispered Mrs. Fontleigh.

She herself was watching the girlish face with its renewed

vitality and thinking of how a sculptor might have revelled in its purity of outline. And then—something in Dona's look made her turn, to see the royal figure slowly entering.

In that moment a most curious sensation went through her, as though she had come upon two pictures of the same subject executed in a different medium. In sheer amazement she sat and watched, looking from one to the other as one called upon to witness an unexpected drama.

The woman advancing from the far end of the room was regal of carriage and superbly beautiful. She was splendidly attired in black and silver which made a perfect setting for her snow-white hair. Her pale features were exquisite in form but completely immobile; her dark eyes were remote and cold. Only her scarlet lips seemed to have life.

She was alone and obviously quite uninterested in the few occupants of the room. Calmly she advanced, apparently unaware of the ardent gaze of the girl, or perhaps so accustomed to adulation that it left her unmoved. But Dona—Dona was like a being transformed. She saw nothing but the queenly figure approaching the table that had been specially decorated and set apart from the rest, and as it paused at length she rose with a low exclamation and moved forward, forgetful of all beside.

Guillaume gasped at her, but it would have taken more than any opposition that he might have offered to have withheld her from her purpose.

As if drawn magnetically, she went straight to the magnificent stranger, and her hands were extended like the hands of an eager child hastening to welcome one greatly beloved.

"Oh!" she breathed. "It is you—it is you!"

She did not reach her objective, for quite suddenly she was checked—as completely and as forcibly as if she had tried to stem the rushing waters of the mill-stream at home. A cold stare greeted her—too aloof for haughtiness, too hard almost to comprehend her.

She stood still, abashed, struggling with swift distress. With an effort she found her voice.

"Oh, please forgive me for speaking to you! You don't know me of course! But I know you—because of Carlo. I belonged to him. You must remember—Carlo!"

The dark eyes regarded her, still with that icy, repelling look.

She might have searched for an answering reflection with more success in some deeply shadowed pool.

A violent tremor went through her. With a desperate movement her hand went to her neck. She was wearing the miniature that Carlo had painted.

She drew it forth with quivering eagerness. "Look!" she pleaded. "Only look!"

The princess looked, with eyes that never varied—eyes that might once have burned with living flame but were now as cold and void as the ancient sacrificial altars in the valley of Tetherstones. And having looked, she turned away with a single, sweeping gesture, uttered a curt command to the obsequious Guillaume, and very calmly and regally, as she had entered, walked straight back down the long room and out at the door.

Dona was left gazing after her as though something in that icy regard had entered into her and chilled her very heart.

Guillaume edged up to her, devoured by curiosity. "*Madame* knows her, yes? But she is a very proud lady—*la Princesse* Maria Valcari de Casiliano. Also, she awaits a guest to-night, and he is late. *Eh bien!*" he shrugged his shoulders. "We must now serve her in her rooms."

Dona did not seem to hear. She was still staring at the empty doorway as if dazed. Something had happened to her in those few moments, what, she scarcely knew; but it was as if all feeling in her had been dried up at the source, and she was numb from head to foot.

A gentle hand took her by the arm, and she knew that Mrs. Fontleigh was speaking and quietly urging her from the room.

She went like an automaton, neither hearing nor seeing.

Up in their own rooms a spurious sort of energy entered into her, and she spoke. "She knew me," she said slowly, "though she wouldn't know me."

"My dear," said Mrs. Fontleigh, regarding her somewhat anxiously, "I don't think she herself is at all a desirable person to know."

An odd little silent laugh went through Dona. "Shall I tell you something?" she said. "She is my mother."

Mrs. Fontleigh showed no surprise, nor did she attempt to refute the idea. "There are some things," she said quietly, "which are better left unsaid—and unthought of."

Dona stood very still as though wrestling with some problem. She was actually trying to face the fact that the lovely ideal over which she had spent so many hours of exquisite dreaming was shattered. It did not come home to her at the moment, but she had a fateful feeling that it would later.

The miniature still dangled from her neck. She took it in her hand and surveyed it long and closely, still as it were striving to convince herself.

"Carlo loved her," she said at length, "when she was young—like that."

"I wonder—was it love?" said Mrs. Fontleigh.

A sudden shiver caught Dona. She threw a swift, half-frightened look around. "Oh, I don't like this place!" she said, and in her voice was a sound of heartbreak more tragic than any cry for help. "I don't believe I shall ever try to paint again. I don't see things—as they are. It's all—horrible. Please take me home—take me home!"

"We will go back to-morrow," said Mrs. Fontleigh. "Oh, you poor little soul!"

And with the words she gathered the girl into her arms; for Dona had collapsed, sobbing passionately, wildly: "Oh, if my little Carlo came back to me—in the after years—do you think—do you think—I would ever turn him away—like that?"

CHAPTER VII

WAS IT LOVE?

IT WAS a day of icy cold winds on which they returned to England. Mrs. Fontleigh shivered below throughout the crossing which was rough enough to cause Dona the acutest discomfort. When they reached London, they were both in a state of physical misery so intense as to reduce any mental distress almost to vanishing point. Perhaps it was as well for Dona, for it gave her time to recover somewhat from the rudeness of the shock of disillusionment ere her thoughts could concentrate upon it again.

When she did begin to face the situation once more, it was to realise that the mirage had gone for ever from her desert. That was all; yet to Dona, it was an irreparable loss more overwhelming in a sense than even the loss of little Carlo. For that at least had left her with warm and tender memories, but this new thing had implanted in her a wholly unknown bitterness which seemed to spread to everything within her experience, involving her whole existence and even the memory of Carlo, that dearly loved and revered presiding spirit of her childhood. The brief episode had seemed to shrivel her very soul, and her entire outlook was changed. It was not her first lesson, but it went deeper—like burning iron destroying the living tissues. Her faith in humanity was so badly shaken that she viewed the whole world with suspicion. And she was ashamed. It seemed to her that there were only Michael and Mrs. Conyers left, and she realised now that all that they had done for her had been out of pity. They would have done as much in the first place for a starving puppy. Carlo had died and left her penniless and nameless. They had taken her—the charity child—daughter of a princess yet no less an object of charity—and given her everything she possessed. Small wonder that Garth had sneered in the old days! Small wonder indeed that he had held her so lightly!

In the long dark hours of the sleepless nights that followed, Dona would be tormented, seeing her whole life with eyes that gazed for the first time upon the raw, revolting truth.

It was because they had taken her thus—Michael and Mrs. Conyers—that they had regarded her as their own peculiar responsibility. And when Garth had treated her as a girl of her origin might conceivably have expected to be treated, they had rescued her to save their own pride. To Michael—that upright, unyielding man—had fallen the task of lifting her out of the mire, and he had done it characteristically, unflinchingly. He had even been kind to her and had not exacted the ordinary compensation which most men might have demanded. Often in those silent watches she writhed and quivered at the thought as she once had writhed and quivered under Garth's summary chastisement. It was horrible to her, yet she could not escape from it. Michael had married her, knowing her to be besmirched and contemptible, out of that high principle of his which would not suffer him to acknowledge a mistake. And because he had despised her utterly, he had stifled all natural desire within himself and left her loveless and alone.

But what was love? Ah, what was love? Could it be that only women might know its true meaning? What if she had summoned all her courage and offered her love—which was her whole self—to Michael, would he have turned away? Of course—of course he would!

He was not—apparently—as other men—certainly not as Garth. He neither took nor gave freely. The inner sanctuary of his soul was secret and inviolable. He could be kind to her—aloofly, impersonally kind—and yet bestow nothing more than he would have bestowed upon the stray puppy to which she likened herself. Loyalty was all he asked in return, and that he seemed to take for granted. Or stay—did he even want that now?

Suspicion—that unknown evil which had come upon her of late—asked the question very clearly of her lonely soul. He had let her go without word or sign of the bond that had been forged between them, and no message from him had reached her since. She had never looked for a message, never expected one, yet now she had begun to ask herself, what did that silence imply? And she could find no answer beyond the obvious conclusion that he was completely indifferent as to her conduct or welfare. But then—something within her would cry out at this—Michael was not obvious. He lived his sombre life behind barriers which she did not believe even his mother might pass. It was possible—it was

more than possible—that he had given her the protection of his name at his mother's urgent entreaty, for dear Mrs. Conyers was very far from being indifferent with regard to anything that concerned her. But beyond that possibility was a territory unknown, within which she had never set foot. And often, racked by shame and wounded pride she would tell herself that since the door was so implacably closed against her, it would be better, far better, to go in the opposite direction. That had been her instinct in that horrible episode in Paris, and it remained her instinct now. It was only the memory of Mrs. Conyers and her loving devotion that gave her pause. To break away from Michael must involve a final parting with her. Besides, whither could she go? Unless she could do something with her talent, which seemed to have deserted her utterly with this last blow, there could be no prospect of independence for her. And she was beginning to feel that independence was the only thing in life worth having.

She turned over many things in her mind, but she could not pretend to herself that her health was as yet equal to any very arduous toil, and she lacked the training for professional secretarial work. Even now she could not be an active playmate to young Robin though their friendship was as close as ever. But his need of playmates would soon be over, for he was to go to school after Christmas. He was already full of plans for the exciting future—that future which for her was so dark and cheerless, and she could not expect to retain even a place in his memory when the holidays came to an end.

The improvement in her general aspect which had been so apparent had begun to fade again, but Mrs. Fontleigh scarcely had time to remark it, far less to take any steps to counteract the set-back, for within a very few days of their journey home she was herself taken ill with a form of blood-poisoning which very quickly took a serious turn.

It was a disorder which developed with alarming rapidity, and Dona was aroused from her sad musings late one night by Robin's nurse who was hastening to the telephone for a doctor and ran into her room to beg her to go to Mrs. Fontleigh as she did not think she ought to be alone.

In swift consternation Dona sprang up and threw on a wrap. She knew that Mrs. Fontleigh had not been well, but they had both ascribed her indisposition to the effects of a chill contracted

on the boat and had imagined that a few days of rest and warmth would dispel it.

But now to her dismay she found herself face to face with an emergency. Mrs. Fontleigh was sitting up in bed, evidently in great pain, and her glassy eyes stared with a burning fixity at Dona without the faintest sign of recognition.

"I don't know who you are," she said, "but I don't want you. I want my husband. Fetch my husband, please!"

She threw off the bed-clothes with the words and would have risen, but a sudden spasm of agony caught her and she sank forward, groaning.

Dona went to her and wrapped her warm young arms about her, supporting her. And presently Mrs. Fontleigh collapsed against her, still persistently moaning for her husband, but otherwise quiescent.

It seemed hours before the nurse returned from her errand. She had had difficulty in getting hold of a doctor, she said; but there was one coming, and he ought to be there very soon.

Mrs. Fontleigh had sunk into a state that was bordering upon unconsciousness, and Dona sat beside her, holding her hand and gently smoothing it while the nurse heated some water and made various preparations for the doctor's possible requirements.

Dona scarcely dared to move, lest another paroxysm should come on. She was thoroughly alarmed. The rapid breathing and burning skin told a tale of high fever even to the most inexperienced, and the low, almost insensible utterances from time to time added to her anxiety. Her own utter helplessness troubled her deeply. She felt that after all she had gone through with little Carlo she ought to be able to do more than just sit and look on. It was to her but another instance of her complete uselessness and superfluity in a world which had small room for the unprofitable.

Time passed, and even the nurse's ingenuity for devising fresh aids began to flag. She had left the door open, so that the first sound of the doctor's arrival might reach them. It was not the doctor Mrs. Fontleigh generally had, so she explained to Dona. He, it seemed, was away; but she knew that she had had this one once before, and he was a Harley Street man, so she hoped she had done the right thing.

Dona was sure she had, and fell afresh to listening with strained nerves for the rush of wheels down in the road below.

When it came at last, her heart gave a throb of relief, for Mrs. Fontleigh was becoming restless again, as though the pain were returning.

The nurse tiptoed to the door. "The porter will bring him up," she said. "I'll be ready to let him in."

Dona watched her creep from the room. There were no other servants in the flat, and the sense of isolation pressed upon her though she had never noticed it before.

She listened intently for the sound of the lift, but ere it reached her the suffering she had feared had returned with redoubled violence, and Mrs. Fontleigh was writhing in her arms with renewed incoherent entreaties for her husband mingled with gasps of pain which literally frightened Dona. It took all her strength to keep the struggling woman in the bed, for physical anguish seemed to have bereft her of her senses, and when a lull came at length Dona was almost at the end of her resources.

But help was at hand, and with deep thankfulness she looked up to meet it.

In that moment something within her leaped and stood petrified—like a terrified animal suddenly driven from its refuge. With Mrs. Fontleigh still clasped in her arms, she stared across the room to the open door and the man who was just entering. Their eyes met and held for one long second, and then with a hard sobbing breath the girl's broke away. She lowered her head and hid her face against the senseless form she held.

"Ah!" said Garth very quietly as he advanced. "This must be dealt with at once. Let me see what I can do!"

CHAPTER VIII

FATE

THAT ONE overwhelming moment seemed to deprive Dona of the powers to will and act, and in the interval that followed she hardly knew what happened. She moved indeed, but she was like an automaton in the midst of turmoil, and again—but vaguely and without distress—she realised that she was not needed. Robin's nurse was at hand to do all that was required, and she drifted away, whether on her own initiative or not she never remembered, and sat down in the dining-room to wait.

A sense of fatefulness was upon her against which it was useless to struggle. She no longer felt keenly anxious regarding Mrs. Fontleigh. Garth had the situation in hand, and Garth would save her. All her life, it seemed, had been leading up to this one point, and of what lay beyond she had not the remotest conception. Somehow, that also did not rest with her.

Time passed—whether hours or only minutes, she did not know. The clock on the mantelpiece struck one, and she was faintly surprised that it was no later. She was tired, intensely tired, but it was not the kind of weariness that induces sleep. Though so strangely stunned and emptied of emotion, she knew that she would not sleep. All that was natural in her seemed to have dried up at the source. It was as if she had lost herself and were left feebly groping in the darkness after a vanished personality.

She sat with her arms on the table and her chin resting in her hands, not thinking in the ordinary sense of the word, just numbly waiting.

Something would happen soon. Some Fate was coming to her, surely and inevitably, and until it came there was nothing to be done but wait.

Something did happen at length, just as the clock chimed the quarter. A door down the passage closed softly, and a quiet step approached.

A swift tremor went through her; otherwise she did not stir,

but sat gazing fixedly at the half-open door in front of her. A hand touched it. It swung wide. Garth entered.

He closed the door very definitely behind him and came forward. As of yore, his pale, composed countenance expressed very little. His thin lips had the old faintly cynical curve as he approached.

"And what brings you here, I wonder?" he said.

The casual question sent her back through the years with a suddenness that made her gasp. She was a child again and strangely at the mercy of this man—whose presence so attracted her, so repelled her, so dominated her.

Something made her rise to face him, as though he had been her master. In a low voice she gave the required information.

"I have been with Mrs. Fontleigh for some weeks. She was very kind about my painting and had me to stay with her. We have just got back from Paris."

"Ah! So I heard," said Garth. He took out his cigarette-case, and she watched every gesture still with that overwhelming sensation of being completely at his disposal which had swayed her as a child.

He took out a cigarette and tapped it thoughtfully on the lid of the case while his grey eyes surveyed her calmly, appraisingly, yet with an odd flickering gleam in their regard which was somehow like a flame seen through a sheet of ice.

"Well?" he said deliberately at length. "And have you set the Thames on fire yet?"

She did not take offence at the supercilious enquiry; he had always been a privileged person and could make her feel contemptible at will. Yet the simplicity of her reply was not without dignity. "No. I haven't even tried."

"I congratulate you," said Garth. "No one can do more than one thing well at a time, and your job is obvious. D'you remember Pan's Pool?"

She started, and a vivid blush rose up as if from the very heart of her. "You mean—the picture?" she hazarded.

He lit his cigarette with a smile from which the cynicism had begun to fade. "That picture is in my possession now," he said. "Whenever I want to satiate myself with sheer beauty, I sit and look at it."

A sharp quiver went through Dona; she half turned from him. "Ah!" she said. "I wish it had never been painted!"

"Why should you wish that?" said Garth. "Must you grudge a poor man one of the few pleasures he has left?"

She did not answer him, she could not; for his tone held something more than mockery, something she dared not face.

He sat down on the edge of the table. "You needn't worry about Mrs. Fontleigh," he said after a moment. "She is in no immediate danger, anyhow to-night. She wants her husband, and I've told the nurse he'd better be sent for. By the way, I'm sending in a trained nurse in the morning, and that won't leave much room for you, I'm afraid."

"No. I shall have to go when Colonel Fontleigh comes," Dona said with a sinking heart.

"He ought to be here in a couple of days," said Garth. "I'm sorry to be the means of curtailing your holiday."

"It isn't—you," said Dona without looking at him.

"No; as a matter of fact it isn't," agreed Garth. "If it rested with me, I should arrange things quite differently. But I'm afraid I am not likely to be consulted in that respect."

Dona was silent. She felt as if something were expected of her, but what she did not know.

He startled her an instant later by laying a steady hand on her arm and drawing her quietly round to face him. "What did you marry Michael for?" he said.

She made a swift movement of protest; it was more than she could bear.

He frustrated her, but very gently, taking her by the other arm also. "You'd better tell me," he said, "and I shall know once and for all."

She had begun to tremble. "Oh, please!" she said. "Please!"

"Was it the child?" he asked.

She shrank as if at the piercing of a nerve. "Don't!" she implored. "Oh, don't!"

But he persisted, still quietly but with inflexible mastery. "It was the child. And Michael knew?"

In a sort of goaded agony she answered him. "He did it—to save me."

"I see," said Garth. "Hence the family feud! You gave me away?"

"I couldn't help it!" burst from Dona.

"Couldn't you? And yet——" His cynicism had the cutting quality of a whip-lash, but she felt she deserved it; he made her feel like that—"there were other men. That fellow I saved you from—at Pan's Pool——"

"Jim Wallis!" she gasped. "But—but——"

"I know," said Garth grimly. "But there was no need to mention names. If he had come under suspicion—well, after all——" He left the sentence unfinished with a shrug.

"He is married now—to Kitty Frobisher," whispered Dona.

Garth gave a short laugh. "Oh, is he? One amorous swain the less! Pretty Kitty has got her hands full. Let's hope she's equal to it!"

Dona was silent. She had never been able to cope with Garth in this mood. The workings of his mind had always been beyond her, and they baffled her more than ever now. She stood before him like a culprit awaiting his will, either to chastise further or to forgive.

"And so you married Michael!" he said. "A curious complication! I suppose he gave you no choice."

An odd little spasm went through Dona. "He has always been good to me," she said.

"And the baby?" pursued Garth relentlessly.

She braced herself to answer him though she hardly knew how she produced the words. "My little Carlo died in Michael's arms," she said.

Garth nodded as though registering a definite impression. "How long ago was that?" he questioned.

Under her breath she made reply. "It was in September. He was just four months old."

"Bad luck!" said Garth unexpectedly. "And what happened then? You were ill?"

"I hoped—I should die too," Dona said, with quivering lips.

"Ah! One never does," he commented cynically. "But why? You'd got Michael. There's always the chance, isn't there, of getting——"

She interrupted him, unable to endure the inquisition longer. "No!" she cried out vehemently. "No! No! There will never be another. There couldn't be! He didn't marry me—for that!"

Garth gave her a curious look as if he suddenly detected something new in her wrung tones. "Oh!" he said slowly. "So he didn't marry you—for that!"

She tried to hide her face from him, for burning tears which she could not check had taken her unawares. But Garth drew her gently to him instead, making her rest against his shoulder.

"There! It's over," he said. "You've nothing to cry about now. I had to know. It's a pity I didn't know sooner. Anyhow, it's up to me to make good now I do. Cheer up, little girl! It's going to be all right."

She leaned against him for a few seconds, feeling too spent to do otherwise. There was moreover a certain amount of comfort in his hold. She had not expected any kindness from Garth. He was of those who took but seldom gave.

Unlike Michael! How unlike!

She drew herself quietly away at length. Her tears were gone. "That's all the story," she said with a dreary little smile. "I suppose I shall have to go back now. But—it's difficult to fit in where one isn't really wanted."

"Damnably I should think," agreed Garth, narrowly watching her. "But why put it like that? D'you think it's a statement of fact?"

"Of course!" she answered with a sigh. "It's only dear Mrs. Conyers who cares—and she can do without me."

"You're very modest," observed Garth, "for a girl with a face like yours."

She shook her head, still faintly smiling. "I don't think that sort of thing brings much happiness."

"Oh, doesn't it?" said Garth. "Well, we must see about that. You're still young—though you may not know it. Seriously," he stood up and laid his hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry about the kid. It shouldn't have happened."

She flinched a little. "He was—my very own," she said, with bent head. "D'you think I'd have been—without him?"

He bent abruptly and kissed the golden hair. "You're a queer little soul," he said. "Well, things are different now and it's never too late to mend. But we'll discuss this later. Don't do anything about going back yet!"

"If I could only find somewhere else to go!" said Dona, voicing the thought that had been in her mind for so long. His kiss had

not thrilled her, but she was grateful for his kindness. She sorely needed it just then.

"Perhaps I can help you there," he said. "But never mind that now! You're worn out. I'm going to give you something to make you sleep, and then you must promise me to go straight to bed."

"Oh, I should like to sleep," said Dona wistfully, looking up at him.

"Well, you will," said Garth, and his smile was kindly. "You've been doing a great deal too much in the lying awake line lately, I can see. I shall have to take you in hand as well as Mrs. Fontleigh, who, by the way, is fast asleep herself by this time and not needing you."

"No one ever has," said Dona with a sigh, "since little Carlo went."

He patted her shoulder and let her go. "Someone will before long," he said. "Make no mistake about that!"

CHAPTER IX

THE TRUTH

SHE HAD not told him about the princess, and in the two days that followed during which he was constantly at the flat she did not tell him. That episode was closed and now it had sunk into insignificance. If she thought of it at all, it was but as another example of the fact that she was superfluous. She had no actual place in the world, and she had come to think that it was well for little Carlo that he had passed out of it for, except for her, he would have been superfluous too.

Mrs. Fontleigh's illness was a severe one, but there was nothing for Dona to do. Two trained nurses were installed, and Robin's nurse who was an old family servant was in command of all domestic arrangements. Colonel Fontleigh was expected home almost at any hour of the day or night, and Lady Fontleigh came up to stay at a hotel near and took possession of Robin.

"You will have to go home, my dear," she said to Dona.

And Dona agreed. Yet she waited on until Colonel Fontleigh should arrive when there would no longer be room for her at the flat. She earnestly desired to stay till Mrs. Fontleigh should be pronounced out of danger, and she had her wish. For on the afternoon that definite news reached them that Colonel Fontleigh would arrive that night, Garth took her aside and told her that the turning-point had been reached and safely passed.

"She's had a bad time," he said. "It was touch and go at first, but we've got it under. She'll be very weak naturally, and she will take some weeks to recover, but she'll be all right, especially if they take her down into the country as soon as she's fit to be moved."

"I'm very thankful," Dona said.

He regarded her shrewdly. "Yes, she's fond of you and a bit worried about you. She was talking to me just now—about your going back. I said I'd see to it for her as I've got to go down in that direction myself."

"Oh, have you?" Dona said. "But you won't want to be

bothered with me. Besides——” she broke off sharply, avoiding his look.

“Besides, you don’t want to go,” finished Garth. “I know all about that. But they’re old-fashioned here. They seem to think a husband and wife have no rights to individual existence for long at a time—whatever the circumstances. Not that she knows anything about them, I take it?”

“No one does,” said Dona, “except—Michael and Mrs. Conyers.”

She spoke with an effort; even to Garth it was hard to speak at all.

He passed the matter by without remark. “Well, pack up and be ready, and I’ll fetch you this afternoon. I’m handing over the case to Dr. Warden now. He’s just got back. And as I say, there’s nothing to worry about. She’s through the worst.”

“But—I can’t go back to-day—without letting them know,” protested Dona.

“Aren’t they expecting you?” questioned Garth.

She coloured deeply. “I haven’t written lately. Things were so uncertain. I didn’t know what to say.”

“Oh, never mind! I’ll see to it,” said Garth. “Or you can send a wire from the station before you start. Anyhow, don’t bother now! The main thing is to get your things together so as to be out of the way when old Fontleigh turns up.”

“Oh yes, I must go,” Dona said. “I’m only in the way here.”

She crept into the sick-room a little later to say good-bye, and found Mrs. Fontleigh, though still very weak, undoubtedly pleased to see her.

“I’m dreadfully sorry,” she murmured, as she held Dona’s hand, “that your visit should have to end like this; but we must meet again at Christmas.”

“Yes, I shall look forward to that,” Dona said.

“Tell them I’m very sorry!” said Mrs. Fontleigh. “Perhaps they will spare you again later on, and we will think out something for your work. I want to give you your training, dear.”

“You are very kind,” Dona said. She caught the nurse’s eye at the moment, and added: “I think I ought to be going now.”

“Very well, my dear.” Mrs. Fontleigh smiled at her. “You are going with your brother-in-law, aren’t you? He promised to look after you.”

"Yes, he is looking after me," Dona assured her. "Please don't worry!"

"That's right." Mrs. Fontleigh closed her eyes. "You couldn't be in safer hands, so I shan't. Good-bye, dear!"

And Dona slipped away.

That was all of farewell she had to think of except the brief leave-taking with Robin's nurse. And then in the murky atmosphere of the November afternoon she collected her belongings and went down to the ground-floor to wait for Garth. She had left everything to him. It seemed the only thing to be done, and she did it without question. Since that first interview his manner had been uniformly kind, but the personal element had been excluded. He had treated her with a business-like brevity which seemed to convey that he had very little time to spend upon her, and it had been a relief to Dona to feel that it was so. He had given her medicine to make her sleep at night, and during her waking hours she deliberately tried to put him out of her thoughts. For the past was past, and grey though the future might be, she had no desire to look back upon the dark and difficult path which she had travelled. With a pathetic kind of philosophy she told herself that in pressing forward she must reach some sort of a goal. The return home was bound to bring back her grief for little Carlo, but she was physically stronger and she would seek to occupy her mind with her painting. It might be that inspiration would reawaken when she was back in the beloved haunts. At least she must do her best in that respect in gratitude to Mrs. Fontleigh. And even Michael and Mrs. Conyers might one day have reason to be proud of her.

So ran her thoughts as she stood by her small belongings in the common vestibule and awaited the coming of Garth. How differently she would have awaited him little more than a year ago!

There was a haze in the atmosphere that told of a fog outside, and the lights had been turned on. They had probably been on all day, and a faint thrill went through her as she thought of the clean air at Cragstone where the fog—if fog there were—was at least white. The river-meadows might be wrapped in it at this very moment, but the smell of the running water would be free from all taint of the town. And somehow the thrill turned to a deep longing for the purity and peace of that quiet haven where

she had suffered so much—where they had been so good to her.

Would they be pleased to have her back? Or were they by now so used to her absence that they would regard her almost as an intruder? Not Mrs. Conyers—dear Mrs. Conyers! But Michael, who was only kind to her for his mother's sake?

Something rose in her throat, and she turned swiftly from the searching glare of the electric light. Michael—who was bound to her for his mother's sake—would he—could he possibly welcome her back? She who had been the cause of so much misery—could she expect it?

The swing-doors opened, but she did not hear them. She was lost in a sadness which of late had oppressed her more than the loss of little Carlo. Michael—who had married her for his mother's sake!

A hand tapped her shoulder. She turned sharply. Garth!

"Ah!" he said easily. "All ready and waiting! Just as it should be! Run along to the car! I'll see to your things."

She gave him a vague smile and blindly obeyed his orders. It was the first step on the journey home. Was she glad? Was she sorry? Not glad, no, not glad—and yet the longing within her was like a thirst reaching deep down into her very soul.

The next thing she knew was Garth getting into the car beside her with that business-like deliberation which characterised most of his movements, and then swinging out into the murky streets with their blurred lights and hurrying figures that somehow seemed almost like phantoms to her abstracted gaze.

He did not talk to her, and very soon she almost forgot his presence. She was thinking of many things—most of all of Michael with the dark overhanging brows that so shadowed his inscrutable eyes. Most of all of Michael whom she would see again so soon!

Of the dreary journey she took small note; she was used to dreary things and had almost come to expect them. She did not even remark upon its length, and scarcely registered the fact eventually that the crowded streets were gone like a picture from a screen and only the gathering darkness was left.

Garth was driving as he did all things with systematic caution and unvarying skill; but Garth was not in the picture. He belonged to that far away past which could never be lived again.

Garth and Miss Armitage—that strange alliance which had once so cruelly wounded her!

On and on through the growing dark now no longer haunted by passers-by—no longer pricked by the glare of street-lamps! And still she took no note of the journey, dwelling only upon the journey's end.

When they stopped at length, she prepared to get out and was only checked by her companion's voice.

"No, we haven't got there yet," he said, and by the light of the dashboard she saw the faint ironical smile on his face. "The question is at the moment, Where are we going?"

"Oh!" Dona looked around her, for the first time realising the fact that the town was left behind. "Oh!" she said again rather blankly. "Are we going all that way by road?"

He gave a short laugh. "I haven't the vaguest idea how far we are going. The pace—and the destination—rest with you."

That opened her eyes, but so suddenly, so amazingly, that she felt blinded. "Garth!" she said with a gasp.

He laughed again more gently, far more subtly. "Dona—Celestis! Were you born to give yourself away—always?"

She shrank, visibly and uncontrollably. "Oh, but you promised—you promised to get me home!" she said.

"I will get you wherever you want to go," said Garth, and though his tone was light it was somehow impressive also. "You can go on—if you so desire—and end up where you say no one wants you. Or—you can turn aside down a pleasant by-path, and remain with someone who does."

"Garth!" she said again, but not reproachfully or even in protest, simply as one who understood.

"Well?" he said, and slipped an arm around her. "I've told you it's up to me to make good, and I'm quite ready to do so. It may even interest you to know," he was drawing her closer with the words, "that I belong to you in a sense you hardly realise. I've loved you almost since the day after I spanked you—remember?—when you crept into my arms and kissed me?"

His voice was sunk low; he spoke above her bent head which was pressed against his shoulder.

She did not speak at all. She was gasping a little still, but not as if in any great distress.

He went on softly. "You were such a baby, I couldn't take you—or myself seriously. Even that night out on the heather—well, you caught me in a sort of fairy net. I couldn't get away, but I didn't call it love. But I'll tell you this, Dona. If I had known that you were going to bear a child of mine, I would never have left you."

She spoke at last, without stirring in his hold. "You too would have married me—for the child's sake."

"No!" he said sharply. "No!"

She went on as if she had not heard, very quietly, with infinite sadness. "And you would always have regretted that you had given up the chance of marriage with a brilliant woman like Miss Armitage for a nobody—like me."

"You're quite wrong," Garth said. "I'm willing to admit that from some points of view my marriage was a mistake; but at least she never knew it. I played the game."

"What game?" said Dona.

For a moment curiously he was embarrassed. Then swiftly and sweepingly he resumed his customary easy air of mastery. "My dear child, you don't understand. How could you? You've never been taught. But anyhow, I've never shirked my obligations, and I never shall. If you want me to marry you, I'm quite willing to do so now, whatever it may entail."

"How could you marry me," said Dona, "when I am married to—Michael?"

"Oh!" He laughed. "That's nothing. That can be set aside. A nominal marriage can be annulled. Why, surely—" a sudden deep note crept into his voice—"you must realise that you are *my* property in a sense that you have never been *his*."

"Because I was wicked—with you?" Dona said.

He laughed again. "Call it wickedness if you like! I prefer to call it by a prettier name."

"What name?" said Dona.

Half-callously, half-indulgently, he answered her. "I call it love myself. Most people do. Don't you?"

She shook her head without speaking.

"Oh, come!" he remonstrated, rallying her. "Are you going to pretend that you're no longer in love with me?"

"I'm not," said Dona in a stifled voice.

"What?" He bent over her. "You're lying! I don't believe it."

Dona!" He turned her face upwards suddenly. "How dare you?"

Her eyes were enormous in the dim light; they gazed up at him out of a deathly pallor.

"How dare you?" he said again, and swiftly, on a passionate impulse his lips met hers.

He kissed her hotly, devouringly, pressing her, crushing her, to his heart. "You child!" he said. "You angel! D'you think I'll ever let you go again?"

She did not answer him. Speech was impossible in that close embrace. But the lips he kissed so fiercely were cold beneath his own. She was as passive in his hold as though she had been unconscious.

"There!" he said at last. "Does that make things any clearer? Don't you ever dare to tell me that you don't love me again!"

"I don't," Dona said.

She was trembling, but still unresisting. Perhaps some instinct warned her against resistance.

"What d'you mean?" he demanded, half-incredulous, his face still touching her own.

She closed her eyes as though in answer, and again he kissed her with lips that seemed as if they would draw her very being into his own.

"How's that?" he said at length. "Don't be so helpless, child! What's happened to you?"

"Nothing." Faintly she made reply. "You—I suppose you can do what you like with me. Only—only—you can't make me love you. That's over—that's past. I couldn't make myself—now."

"Don't talk nonsense!" he said, with the confidence of complete assurance. "You don't know what you're saying. Of course you love me! You always have! You're only trying to get your own back! Well, you wait till we're married, that's all."

"Yes." His hold had relaxed, and she slowly withdrew herself, as one too tired for effort. "We will wait till we're married this time, shall we?"

Something in her tone caught him in the height of his passion. He bent and looked at her closely.

"Dona! What d'you mean? Of course we'll wait, if you wish

it, till we're married—that is, if we can." Again the deep note of passion was in his voice.

"I can," Dona said, her eyes still closed, her face like death.

"What do you mean?" he said again. "You're willing to marry me, I suppose?"

She nodded, without opening her eyes. "Yes, I'll marry you—if you'll have me—without loving you."

"Dona!" he said.

She opened her eyes suddenly and looked at him straight and full. She spoke from her soul. "If you will marry me—and set Michael free," she said, "I know it will be better for him. I'll do it—for that."

"Dona!" he said again. "Are you mad? What are you saying? You loved me once. You can't have forgotten!"

"No." Very slowly, with unalterable conviction came her answer. "But that was before I knew you—before I knew Michael. I know you now—and I know him." A little sound that was like a whimper crept into her voice. "I love him—very much—with all my heart. But he doesn't love me, and he never can now—because I was so wicked with you. And so—and so—I'll marry you—if you like—and set him free. I owe it to him, don't you see?" Was it heartbreak now that sounded in her voice as she ended? "And—and it really won't make any real difference to you—will it?—in the end?"

"Dona!" He went back from her, as if he had been struck between the eyes. "My God!" he said, and it was the instinctive cry of a suddenly wounded man seeking help from the unknown. "My God!"

And the next moment he had flung open the door of the car and blundered out into the night.

Dona sank back on the cushions, too spent to move hand or foot.

CHAPTER X

AMENDS

A MORNING in late November with the faint smell of yesterday's bonfire in the air and the river-mists curling upwards beneath the rising sun! By noon that sun would have drawn up the mists entirely, and a golden autumn day would be left. For it was warm for the time of year. Though the days were short, winter was still holding aloof.

"Such a help!" as Mrs. Conyers said contentedly as she sat at the breakfast-table.

It was her peaceful fashion to count up her blessings whenever she was disappointed over anything, and she was disappointed to-day. For the postman had been, and there was no letter from Dona. She had not heard from her for more than a week and did not know even if she were in England.

Michael's brief glance across the table had expressed nothing whatever, and he had proceeded to open his own budget of business letters in silence.

Most of them he did not pause to read, but placed on one side for further consideration in his office. His meal was a very practical affair. He never seemed to notice what he ate. When he had finished, he got up as usual to go to his work.

Mrs. Conyers looked up. Somehow she was obliged to speak. "Still nothing from Dona!" she said. "Why, I don't even know where she is. They were leaving Paris some days ago."

Michael's countenance remained unchanged. "I shouldn't worry," he said, gathering up his correspondence. "She's in good hands."

"I know," said Mrs. Conyers, and stifled a sigh. "No, we mustn't worry."

Michael went away to his office. He had plenty to do, for he had never filled Dona's place at the typewriter. He plied it himself upon occasion, but more often he dispensed with it altogether and wrote his letters in his own hand. It was usually quicker in the end

Before dealing with his correspondence he had to interview Joe Best and give him instructions regarding the day's work. It was also his custom to go round the Mill and satisfy himself that everything was in good working order. His business had absorbed him more and more of late and he did not apparently spend much thought upon anything else. Joe Best was a keen assistant, and between them the Mill was reaching a pitch of prosperity which might ere long necessitate an enlargement of premises and plant. The rumbling engines and gushing water were a perpetual accompaniment to all the secretarial work which Michael did by day, drowning all other sounds, and when they ceased at night the silence was almost obtrusive.

Though the sun was still veiled in mist, the warmth of it was beginning to be felt, and when he finally settled down in his office Michael left the door open as had been his custom throughout the summer. Dash the spaniel took immediate advantage of this and spread his stout figure on the mat. Though he had never been known to growl at any intruder except Polly the cat, he liked to feel himself on guard in his master's vicinity. The disappearance of little Carlo from the scene had been a real grief to the old dog, and he reattached himself more closely than ever to Michael in consequence. He did not often growl even at Polly now. There was no longer any need to keep her at a distance.

So it was no vocal alarm, only the sudden violent wagging of his feathery tail, that caught Michael's attention and made him look across from his seat at the writing-table barely half an hour after his entrance, with the abrupt realisation of the arrival of someone other than Joe Best or any of his other employees. Dash was too dignified and elderly to wag to exaggeration for any of them.

Pen in hand, Michael waited. It might be someone from the village though he scarcely thought so. Dash generally reserved such an effusive welcome for members of the Mill household. It might be his mother, but that also was unlikely, for Dash had seen her before that morning.

It might be—suddenly he put down his pen and rose; for Dash had left his post and gone forth with an eager whine of greeting.

There followed a brief pause, and Michael stood still as if an unseen barrier prevented him moving forward. Then there came a step on the threshold. A figure darkened the doorway and

entered. Garth stood face to face with his brother while the old spaniel fawned about his feet.

The sound of the machinery in the building across the yard seemed to swell to an uproar in those few moments. There was no pretence of greeting between them. Michael stood as though he had been turned to stone. And Garth, curiously haggard and lacking in self-sufficiency, regarded him with a strange embarrassment.

It was he who broke the silence. "I can come in, I suppose? I've something to say to you."

Michael stared at him with eyes that seemed to lighten under their black brows. He said nothing whatever, and Garth turned and shut the door behind him, deadening the roar of the machinery.

Then he moved forward, and the light from the window caught his face, revealing it ashen grey. "There's nothing to make a fuss about," he said. "I realise all you could possibly find to say before you begin, and I haven't armed myself with any excuses. In fact—I'm unarmed." A challenging note rang in his voice. "But I'm not here on my own business. I'm here on yours."

"On mine?" It was Michael who spoke, but his face, except for those gleaming eyes of sheer savagery, was mask-like, terrible in its immobility.

"Yes, on yours." Grimly Garth confirmed the statement. "I've come to tell you something—not because I want to—but because I've got to. It's just this—that you're a damn' fool." He paused a second, smiling with a bitterness that was beyond cynicism. Then, as no word was forthcoming from the man who faced him, he ended: "You can knock me out when I've done. I'm finished all right. I've brought you the thing I wanted for myself—simply because it's your property, and not I—or anyone else—can take it from you. I've brought you—Dona."

"What?" Michael said, and his voice was like a burst of thunder, but the next moment he curbed himself. With all the strength of his manhood he checked the impulse to mad fury that raged within him. Perhaps there was something in Garth's demeanour that appealed inexplicably to the higher part of him. "Go on!" he said in tones half-strangled. "I'm listening."

Garth made an odd gesture that had in it more of despair than renunciation. "So far as I'm concerned that's all there is to be

said. She has no use for me, and she worships you. Apparently you don't know it. Well—I've told you."

"You'd better tell me something I can believe," Michael said almost under his breath.

Garth's thin lips went back suddenly like the lips of a snarling animal. "That's right! Dig it in!" he said. "D'you think I'm doing this for pleasure? D'you imagine—if I didn't care for her—I'd do it at all?"

Michael gripped his hands behind him. It was all he could do to keep them from his brother's throat. But there was something here beyond his comprehension. He dared not let himself go.

"Can't you tell me the plain truth?" he said. "Where is she?"

Garth jerked his head. "Up in the Monolith Wood. We've travelled nearly all night. I brought her from the Fontleighs. She was put in my charge." He checked himself momentarily with a rather terrible sound that was between a laugh and a cry. "I've been completely trustworthy, I assure you. I've had no chance to be anything else. Must I keep on saying it? You're the only person that counts with her. And—because she loves you—mark that—she wants to set you free."

"To set—me—free!" Michael repeated the words with a very strange intonation, as if he were trying to comprehend their meaning.

"Exactly!" Still with that painful snarl on his lips Garth set himself to drive conviction home. "I know—but she doesn't—what she means to you. I know—and you don't—what you mean to her. That's all. And now I've done. You'd better go to her. She's expecting me. But that doesn't matter. It's you she wants. Go to her—and for God's sake—make her happy—if you can!"

He turned with the words, blindly, almost with violence, feeling for the door-handle. But before he found it, Michael moved. In a single stride he had reached him.

"Here—Garth—don't go!" he said. The anger had gone out of his voice; it was harsh with a very different emotion. He grasped Garth by the shoulder. "Are you sure of what you say?" he demanded. "Are you quite sure?" And then abruptly: "No, don't answer! If you say it—it's true!"

Garth flung round facing him. For a few hard-breathing seconds it looked as if the enmity between them must blaze up again. He tried to revive his air of contemptuous defiance to

cover his discomfiture; but for some reason he failed. It was as though a force upon which he had always relied gave way unexpectedly under the strain.

He spoke, very quietly, with absolute sincerity. "Yes, it is true—not because I say it. You'll find—if you give her the chance—that she says it too. Go, man—and find out for yourself!"

He freed himself from Michael's hold with the words, and again made as if he would depart. But again he stopped. For Michael's hand came suddenly downwards, steadily, unmistakably, seeking his. And, with his back half-turned, perfunctorily, with a shamed gesture, Garth responded to that mute offer of reconciliation.

"I'm off now," he said.

It was Michael who opened the door. "Come back—when you feel like it!" he said.

The veiled sunshine gleamed upon them both. Garth paused, his face averted.

"All right—thanks—some day soon—tell the mother!" he said.

"Good-bye!" said Michael.

Garth turned at last. His face had a twisted smile—the smile of the man who will die rather than cry out. "Good-bye, Mike!" he said. "Good luck!"

And with a wave of the hand he was gone, striding away down the yard without a backward look.

Michael stood motionless, and watched him out of sight.

CHAPTER XI

THE HEAVENLY GIFT

IT WAS very quiet up in the Monolith Woods. The morning mist was still winding among the trees, and the stones—those ancient, time-worn boulders—looked ghostly in the greyness. Dona sat on the bench-like boulder near the brow of the hill, and wondered why she was there at all.

Garth had brought her. It was in response to Garth's domination that she found herself in that old, so dearly loved haunt. But she was so dazed with weariness and the long, long tumult of emotions that she could hardly believe in the peace that now surrounded her. Surely it was all a dream, and she would wake very soon—oh, so soon!—and find herself back in the smoke and ceaseless noise of London. Why Garth had brought her hither she had not fully grasped. For some reason he had seemed to think that he must see Michael, but he had promised her that she should not be dragged into any storm or conflict of wills. He had sworn that she should be left in peace, whatever happened. He had also said that he would return to her when the talk with his own people was over; but time had passed, and he had not returned.

He would return; she was certain that he would return. He had treated her with the most amazing gentleness throughout that long, long journey through the night. She had slept part of the time after a troubled fashion that had not brought her much refreshment, and they had made a pause at a wayside inn for breakfast. He had compelled her to eat with that professional insistence which no one ever seemed to dispute, and then without haste, but quite inevitably, he had brought her home.

It was at his suggestion that she had gone up the well-remembered path into the wood to rest. He seemed to realise her need for rest as she scarcely realised it herself. And so he had left her. Afterwards, she had found that stone bench on the quiet hillside and sat waiting, waiting, till he should return to take her away.

The sun was mounting higher and beginning to make itself felt.

Here and there a few leaves were rustling down to their calm death. The scent of the wood was of a sweetness unknown to spring. It filled her senses with a fragrant warmth that moved her almost to tears. Curiously, the memory of old Uncle Simon came to her, and she listened half-instinctively for the sound of the passing-bell.

It was here that she had sat on that evening so long ago and wept because the lesson-time was over and her old friend gone. Yet—how much—ah, how very much—she had learned since then!

Almost like the sequence of a dream she remembered how suddenly she had felt that she was no longer alone, and how her eyes had wandered downwards and discerned a figure leaning against a tree. The impulse came to her to look again, but she resisted it, because of the emptiness that awaited her. When Garth came back, he would not pause. He would come straight to her and take her away. He would never be able to fill the emptiness, but she had known for long that that must be hers as long as she drew breath. She had sinned and this was her punishment. The splendour and the fulfilment of life were not for her. She had forfeited all on the day that she had gone into the starlit night with Garth and returned with the bells of the heather in her hair.

So for a long time she sat quite motionless, waiting for Garth to return.

But the sun was breaking through, and presently a gleam caught her where she sat. It was like the touch of a friendly hand. A warm thrill went through her. She moved on the stone bench and opened her eyes wide. The wood was full of a glory that was almost unimaginable. The bare tree-trunks shone silvery in the magic light. She looked around her as one conscious of a vision dawning on the soul. There was something unearthly in the atmosphere—something which she recognised instinctively as Divine.

Her look went upwards, and she remembered that it was a new day, and she had not prayed. . . .

Minutes later she came out of what had seemed like a trance—nearer to communion than prayer itself, and with the rapture still quivering at her heart she gazed down through the shining tree-stems to the spot where once long ago she had seen a figure leaning.

It was then that the vision came to her, but so calmly, so

naturally, that at first it seemed as if it must indeed be a dream. There, in the morning glory, below her, yet not a stone's throw removed, she saw the self-same figure that she had seen on the evening of Uncle Simon's death—under the same tree, in precisely the same attitude, waiting for her!

Dumbly she looked and looked. It could not be real. It must be some trick of her weary brain. Very soon Garth would be coming to take her away for the last time, and she would never see the woods or the old Mill or the lovely river again. Yet, that figure below remained unalterable, not looking at her, but waiting—just waiting. And gradually at last it came to her that she could no longer stay there passive. Some impulse which gave her no choice stirred her to action.

Trembling, she stood up.

In that moment Michael turned. Over the few yards that separated them, his look travelled swiftly upwards and held her own.

"Don't go away!" he said. "I want you."

It was then only that full realisation came to her. For there was that in his voice which told her of a deep appeal to which her very heart cried out in answer. For a second she stood halting, still scarcely believing. Then she went to him—went with her arms outstretched and her face bravely lifted, until, reaching him, she was caught to his breast in a hold that wrapped her close as if it would shield her from all the world and never let her go.

She clung to him with all her quivering strength. "Michael—Michael—oh, Michael!" she said.

He bent above her upturned face; he gazed deeply into her eyes. "Didn't you know—I wanted you?" he said.

Her arms crept upwards, around his neck. "No, never—never!" she told him brokenly. "I'd never have left you if I had. I only went—because of that."

"Dona!" he said.

"It's true!" she asseverated. "I wanted you—so terribly—but—" suddenly the tears were running down her face—"I knew I wasn't good enough—never could be—though I had to love you—for all your goodness to me."

There was no mistaking her now, the truth was shining behind those tears. She was straining him to her, and the glory of giving in that moment made the gift a priceless thing.

Michael's own face quivered as he bent it to hers. "For better—for worse?" he said huskily.

And she answered him with passionate earnestness. "For always—and always—and—always—whatever happens. Oh, you will never—never—know—how precious you are!" . . .

The moment passed, too rare to be prolonged. There are some joys which would shatter the human frame if they endured for long.

And presently when they walked down through the wood together in the generous sunshine, they spoke almost of trivial things. Yet to each it was as though they left a vision that was infinitely sacred up on the high hillside, to which they would return again and again as to the keystone of life itself.

And down in the old Mill House they found Kitty who had dropped in, as she sometimes did, to see Mrs. Conyers, and who had stayed, drinking rhubarb-wine and gossiping, to see Dona come back from the hill of dreams with Michael.

"Well, my dear, you're quite a stranger," was her greeting while Mrs. Conyers folded Dona silently to her heart. "And you've been to Paris, I hear. Well, well, wonders will never cease. I don't suppose my little bit of news will interest you in the least after that."

"Of course it will!" Dona said with sincerity. "I want to know everything that has happened since I went away. What is it?"

She turned to embrace Kitty and was faintly surprised at the warmth with which she was received.

Kitty laughed a trifle self-consciously as she released her. "Oh, I have lots of things to tell you which can't be said out loud," she declared. "But the nine-days' wonder of the village is that Mrs. Dipper, good worthy soul—has cast all her prejudices to the winds and is going to marry—who do you think?"

"Old Spademoore," said Dona.

Kitty clapped her plump hands in ecstatic applause. "You clever creature! How did you guess? Isn't it too absurd—after all this time? And they've never really liked each other till they were separated. I suppose I ought not to laugh, but I can't help it."

"Dear old Mrs. Dipper!" said Dona. "I'm very glad. But what will your father do?"

"That was my first thought," said Kitty piously, "for I shan't

have any time to spare for him in the future. But it's all right. They're both going to live with him. Spademoore can't go on digging much longer. He'll get the pension of course, and she's an excellent manager and does Dad very well. So, on the whole, it seems to be all for the best."

"It's one of the last things I expected," said Dona.

Kitty laughed aloud. "But isn't that what always happens? You yourself—who would ever have expected you—a married woman—to go wandering off to Paris of all places and stay away all this time? But I suppose now you've been once you'll go again and study art and all that sort of thing, until you're quite a celebrity."

"Oh no!" Dona contradicted her with a quick flush. "I've done with wandering. I've come home for good now." She backed a little against Michael. Her hand was behind her; but they did not know that he was holding it while he smoked his pipe and listened. "I'm never going back to Paris or London," she said. "I'm giving up—that kind of art. I'm just going to be happy painting little woodland pictures—like Carlo's—and living here always—with Michael."

"Bless you, darling!" said Mrs. Conyers.

And: "Well, there now!" said Kitty heartily. "If that isn't the most sensible thing I've ever heard you say! It is exactly what I should advise myself—to do one's duty in that state of life unto which it has pleased God to call one—if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," said Michael, and his deep voice came so unexpectedly that everyone jumped. "And when He sends the heavenly gift as well—to accept it with a thankful heart."

Kitty turned and regarded him searchingly as though she thought he were making fun of her, but finding no tangible evidence thereof, she smiled approval.

"Exactly what I should have said myself," she said. "What more could anybody want?"

Dona was looking up at him too, and there was something about her in that moment that made her lovelier than she had ever been before. "What indeed?" she said softly. "I'm sure I don't know."

THE END

